The New Criterion

January 1992

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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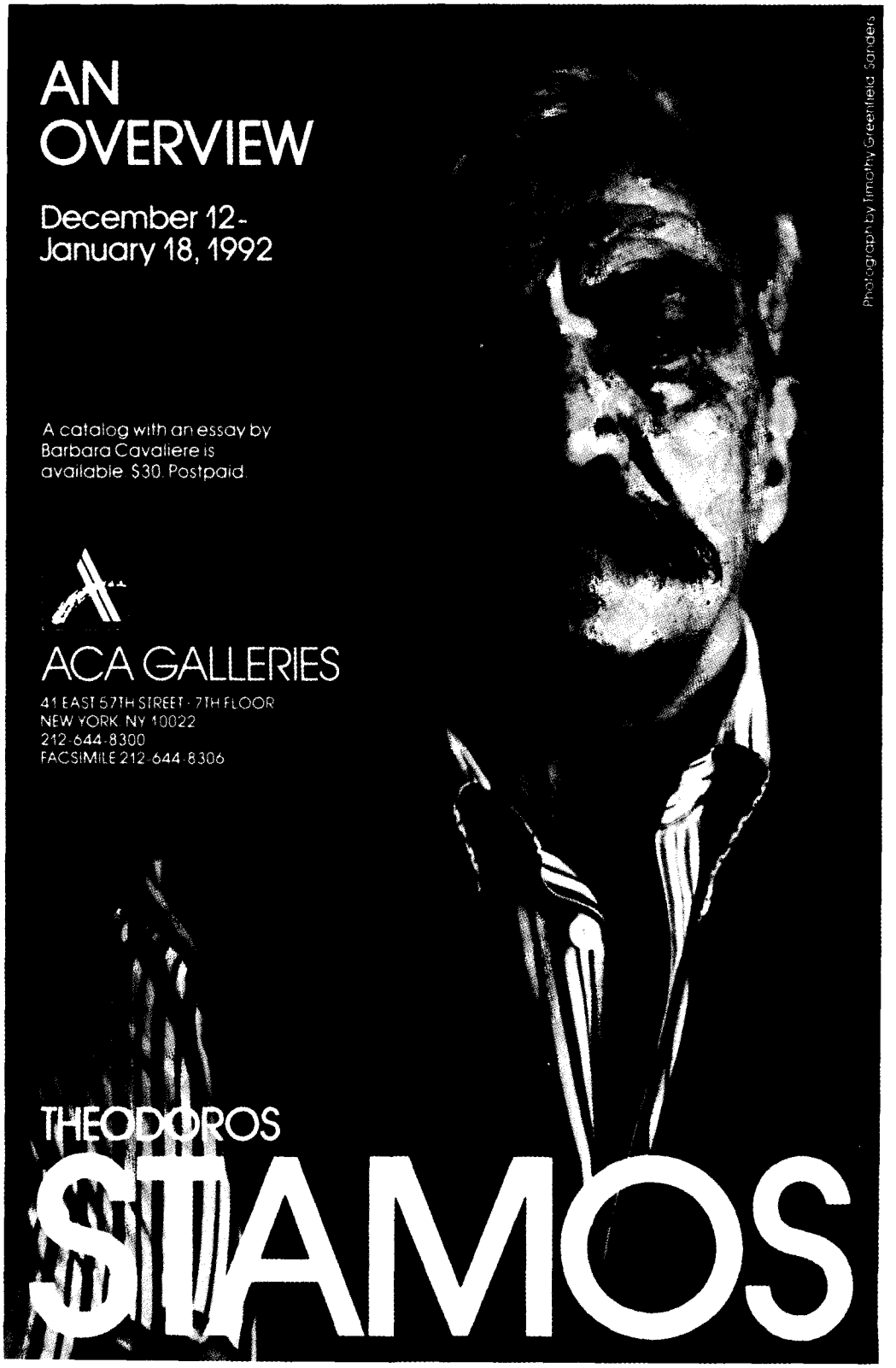

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Editor *Hilton Kramer*
Publisher *Samuel Lipman*
Managing Editor *Roger Kimball*
Poetry Editor *Robert Richman*
Assistant Managing Editor *Christopher Carduff*
Office Manager *Marjorie Danser*

Contributors to this issue

Brooke Allen is the managing editor of *Grand Street*.

Bruce Bawer is the author of *Diminishing Fictions: Essays on the Modern American Novel and Its Critics* (Graywolf Press).

Christopher Carduff reviews books regularly for *The New Criterion*.

Creighton Gilbert is a professor of art history at Yale University.

Samuel Lipman's latest book is *Arguing for Music, Arguing for Culture* (Godine).

Donald Lyons is the regular theater critic for *The New Criterion*.

Heather Mac Donald, a lawyer, has written for *Partisan Review*, *Salmagundi*, and other publications.

John Matthias is the author of *A Gathering of Ways* (Swallow Press).

Leslie Norris is the author of *Sequences* (Gibbs Smith).

Jed Perl's latest book is *Gallery Going: Four Seasons in the Art World* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich).

Julian Symons's latest book is *The Thirties and the Nineties*, a work of social and literary criticism (Carcanet).

Evelyn Toynton has reviewed books for *The New York Times Book Review*, *The American Scholar*, and other publications.

Richard Vine wrote about Walter Benjamin for our June 1990 issue.

Lauren Weiner is a free-lance writer in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Karen Wilkin's latest book is a monograph on Anthony Caro, with photographs by John Riddy (Prestel).

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Notes & Comments: January 1992

The NEA & arts education

Is the National Endowment for the Arts now to become judge and jury in arts education in the United States? That is what has been suggested by no less an authority than the NEA's present chairman, John Frohnmayer. This development is particularly troubling, coming as it does at a time when the NEA, in its present dilapidated and discredited condition, can expect no more than what might be called unearned pity, even from its former friends.

For more than two decades after its founding in 1965, the NEA emphasized not just the money it contributed to arts institutions and artists but also the "Governmental Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval" its financial support conferred. According to this argument, the very fact of NEA grants, no matter how small, brought with it increased private support for particular recipients and for the arts in general.

This happy situation, of course, no longer obtains. The NEA and its advocates can continue to talk, as they always do in difficult times, of grants for the playing of Schubert and the showing of Michelangelo. But such prattle rings ever more hollow. In the public mind and in its own, the NEA is the Maecenas not primarily of Schubert but of Serrano, not of Michelangelo but of Mapplethorpe. For almost two years now, the NEA and its hired guns in public relations—and its voluntary flacks in Washington and elsewhere—have wagered the future of the agency on its sponsorship of social, sexual, and political provocations. Under Frohnmayer's inept leadership, the agency has made clear that its higher artistic mission is to support the "exciting," "cutting-edge" material that the public—and many art lovers cowed into silence by their academically educated betters—have found offensive. Frohnmayer, hardly a paragon of intelligence or consistency, has waffled time and time again, but in the end he has always managed to come down on the side of bad art, if it can be called art at all. Even in the debased terms of the "performance art" Frohnmayer takes so much pride in supporting, his act has been a poor act indeed.

Now, admidst all the hoopla about "America 2000," the glitzy new strategy for making America the best in the world in student achievement by the end of the decade, the NEA has jumped with both feet on the educational bandwagon. The cry once again is arts education, to be overseen by the NEA in Washington and enforced on students and teachers by that unjolly green giant, the federal Department of Education. What will be taught, how it will be taught, and who will teach it are even murkier today than they have been in previous educational cam-

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paigns. Is arts education to be the teaching of masterpieces, the multicultural excitement of ethnic differences, or simply gorging on self-expression? The answer is, surely, "All of the above"—with the masterpieces of civilization coming in a distant last.

All this is bad enough, for it ensures that no worthwhile arts education will take place under NEA auspices. But the real state of affairs is still worse, for the NEA now proposes to become the arbiter of whatever little of art is still taught in American schools. At a recent meeting of the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, a group concerned with increasing private support for the arts, Chairman Frohnmayer announced (according to an official summary of the proceedings):

> . . . the NEA has recently signed an agreement with the Department of Education by which the NEA, with generous assistance from the private sector, will undertake the assessment process for testing in dance, theater, music and the visual arts.

This hardly disinterested judgment, it must be understood, is to come from the agency that has already brought us Serrano and Mapplethorpe, and Holly Hughes and Tim Miller. The present NEA is not fit to judge its own efforts at the implementation of its own programs, and there is no evidence that it is fit to oversee any aspect whatsoever of the arts-education process.

Anything goes

As for philosophy, it makes an architect high-minded and not self-assuming, but rather renders him courteous, just, and honest without avariousness. This is very important, for no work can be rightly done without honesty and incorruptibility.
—Vitruvius, *The Ten Books on Architecture*

With a new series of conferences, books, journals, and T-shirts, the New York architect Peter Eisenman and his colleagues have once again reminded us that the story of the tower of Babel has great pertinence to contemporary intellectual culture. The inaugural publication in his new venture is a three-hundred-odd-page confection from Rizzoli entitled *Anyone*. Since the perfect-bound paperback costs $45 and is utterly devoid of intellectual merit, we cannot recommend that anyone (if we may use the term) purchase the magazine. But those interested in new developments in pretension and bad taste in the graphic arts may wish to thumb through the volume in their local bookstores. It must be seen to be believed. Grotesquely overdesigned by Massimo Vignelli, *Anyone* is printed in a bewildering variety of type-sizes on pink paper. The favored ensemble is red ink on pink paper, though there is plenty of black on pink and even reversed type: pink on black. Its pages are strewn with poorly reproduced halftones and architectural scribbles. Occasionally, text is printed over an image, a particularly unreadable combination. Credits inform us that the text and images were prepared entirely by computer: who could doubt it! The magazine really should come with a ophthamological warning and a bottle of aspirin. The only thing to be said for the design is that it provides a perfect visual analogue for the rebarbative incoherence of the magazine's contents.

Edited by Cynthia Davidson, Mr. Eisenman's wife, *Anyone* is essentially a revised transcript of a large and lavishly publicized "multi-disciplinary and cross-cultural" conference by the same name that was held at the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities in Los Angeles last May. Participants included such left-wing academic stars as Jacques Derrida, Fredric Jameson, and Rosalind Krauss, a few of their industrious academic epigones, such as Mark C. Taylor and John Rajchman, and a garland of fashionable architects from Frank O.

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Gehry and Rem Koolhaas to Arata Isozaki and, of course, Mr. Eisenman himself. The "Anyone" conference was the first of a projected eleven such events, each to be held in a different city (the next is scheduled for Tokyo), each to be devoted to a different *any* word (*anyhow*, *anywhere*, *anything*, etc.), each, God help us, to be followed by a publication similiar to *Anyone*. The subject of the first installment, we were told, "was defined to include issues of signature, the author, and the individual as they relate to architecture." Thanks for that. Press material also explained that the *Any* series (*ANY* being an acronym for "Architecture New York") will include a bimonthly magazine called *Any*, scheduled to start appearing in the fall of 1992, and a line of *Any* books "on the subject of architecture and its relationships to other discourses."

"Other discourses?" Oh, yes. Those who have followed Mr. Eisenman's career know that the New York architect regards architecture more as a verbal than a practical art: like his colleagues, he loves referring to architecture as a "discourse." And although he has lately begun building in earnest—the Wexner Center for the Visual Arts in Columbus, Ohio, being only his most publicized recent project—he is clearly more comfortable talking about . . . well, we were going to say "about architecture," but Mr. Eisenman really doesn't talk much about *architecture*. Nor, come to think of it, is "clearly" the *mot juste*. The hermetic language that Mr. Eisenman has evolved for himself—a remarkable academic patois that manages to avoid touching reality at any point—is anything but clear. And even "comfortable," come to think of it, is incorrect, for if there is one thing that Mr. Eisenman successfully eschews, in his buildings as much as in his writing, it is comfort.

Just how bad is it? We have Mr. Eisenman, in his paper on passion in architecture, informing us that "[t]he traditional dialogue in architecture has always been constituted in terms internal to language—between form and content, rather than between the self and language." We have Derrida beginning his "impromptu remarks" by asking "how can one make a point? As I try to say something on the subject of the point and the point of the subject, I must also ask something of the stranger and the foreigner," etc., etc. Then there is Fredric Jameson denouncing "the concept of personal identity" and Rosalind Krauss meditating on Georges Bataille's essay "The Big Toe." To get the full effect, however, we must sample a somewhat longer passage. Here is a bit from Mark C. Taylor's contribution, "The Subject of Architecture." "The polycentricism of postmodern subjectivity," Professor Taylor tells us,

> is intersubjective as well as intrasubjective. The universality of the ontologico-epistemic subject is dispersed in a multiplicity of subjects themselves inwardly fragmented. In this way, polycentricism inverts but does not subvert the monocentricism of the modern subject. It is as though each subject were constituted by a plurality of ontologico-epistemic subjects that have lost their universality.

Perhaps all this points to the ineluctable instability of language; maybe it betokens a crisis of meaning in Western capitalist societies, enslaved as they are to a logocentric rationalism and patriarchy; but just possibly it illustrates the extent to which deconstruction and allied ideologies have corrupted intellectual exchange even outside the academy. Aristophanes, we recall, called it cloud-cuckoo-land. It is certainly not what Vitruvius had in mind.

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Stuart Davis at the Met

by Hilton Kramer

Few American painters have been more articulate than Stuart Davis (1892-1964) about the purposes of their art, yet throughout a long and distinguished career as a champion of American modernism Davis was clearly troubled about the way he should best define his relation to the aesthetic issue that was paramount in his own work and that would become increasingly crucial to the modernist movement in this country—the issue of abstraction. There were moments in his later years—the period in which abstraction came to dominate American painting—when he simply disavowed all connection with abstract art. "I regret that I have long been 'type-cast' as 'Abstract,'" he wrote in 1951, "because my interest in Abstractions is practically zero. Real Abstract art exists only in Academic painting, or in the minds of Art critics, historians and iconographers."[1] Such assertions were plainly contradicted by his own painting, for as anyone can see in the splendid retrospective exhibition of his paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Davis was in and out and around abstraction—but mostly smack in the middle of it—in a good deal of the art he produced in the last half of his career.[2] Such denials are also contradicted by his many earlier statements in defense of abstraction. In 1940, for example, he wrote that "Abstract art, in the most broad use of the term, is the actual progressive force in the art of our epoch." Moreover, the terms he most consistently used in describing his own painting—"the language of color-space, or form and color," etc.—were obviously intended to denote an art of abstraction.

At the same time, however, Davis felt a deep attachment to the subject matter of his art, and did not hesitate to describe it in detail. Writing about his paintings in 1943, he boasted that "They all have their originating impulse in the impact of the contemporary American environment," and his inventory of the subjects he had been attracted to in this "American environment" was proudly particularized.

> Some of the things which have made me want to paint, outside of other paintings, are:

1 Quotations from Stuart Davis's writings are drawn from *Stuart Davis*, edited by Diane Kelder (Praeger, 1971).

2 "Stuart Davis, American Painter," organized by Lowery S. Sims and William C. Agee, opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on November 23, 1991, and remains on view through February 16. It will then travel to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (March 26-June 7). The book-length catalogue is published by the Metropolitan Museum / Harry N. Abrams (333 pages, $65; $35 paper). With essays by the organizers and by Robert Hunter, Lewis Kachur, Diane Kelder, John R. Lane, and Karen Wilkin, and sometimes lengthy entries on individual paintings, it is one of the best exhibition catalogues on a twentieth-century American subject to come our way in a long time.

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> American wood and iron work of the past; Civil War and skyscraper architecture; the brilliant colors on gasoline stations, chain-store fronts, and taxi-cabs; the music of Bach; synthetic chemistry; the poetry of Rimbaud; fast travel by train, auto, and aeroplane which brought new and multiple perspectives; electric signs; the landscape and boats of Gloucester, Mass.; 5 & 10 cent store kitchen utensils; movies and radio; Earl Hines hot piano and Negro jazz music in general, etc. In one way or another the quality of these things plays a role in determining the character of my paintings. Not in the sense of describing them in graphic images, but by predetermining an analogous dynamics in the design, which becomes a new part of the American environment.

While he continued to deny that his pictorial response to these subjects had anything to do with abstraction, Davis nonetheless affirmed his commitment to what he called "Color-Space Compositions," which we certainly recognize as the essence of abstraction. "Paris School, Abstraction, Escapism?" he asked, and answered: "Nope, just Color-Space Compositions celebrating the resolution in art of stresses set up by some aspects of the American scene."

Was all this ambivalence and irritation about abstraction merely a matter of words, or was there something more important—something central to Davis's sense of himself as an artist—at stake in this running argument that he seems to have carried on with himself as much as with his contemporaries? As one makes one's way through the very large retrospective at the Met—the largest that the museum has ever devoted to a twentieth-century American painter—one is never in any doubt as to the direction in which Davis was moving once he hit his stride in the Twenties and early Thirties. "The 'abstract' kick was on," was the way David himself described his development in the Twenties some years later, careful to enclose the word "abstract" in the quotation marks that suggest, if not irony, at least a certain distance from a doctrinal commitment.

Davis made this autobiographical reference to the "'abstract' kick" he had begun to pursue in the Twenties in a statement published in 1945, eight years after a group of younger modernists in New York had banded together to establish the American Abstract Artists group to promote the interests of pure abstraction and only a year after the death of Mondrian, their most admired leader. Davis, too, admired Mondrian—"one of the half-dozen top individual artists of the twentieth century," he said—but with serious reservations. He was skeptical about the absoluteness of Mondrian's ideas, and not at all sympathetic to the metaphysical disposition that governed them. At the same time, however, Davis was to some extent influenced by Mondrian's pictorial practice in some of his own paintings of the Forties—in *For Internal Use Only* (1944-45), for example, painted in the immediate aftermath of Mondrian's death in New York. My own view is that Mondrian came to represent for Davis an outer limit, perhaps a forbidden limit, an absolute if not an abyss, that was not only alien to his own temperament but finally inimical (as he saw it) to the vitality of art itself. It may have been for a similar reason that Davis withheld his complete assent from the pure abstraction of the New York School, however much he admired some of its individual artists. Without metaphysical interests himself, Davis was by conviction as well as temperament an artist determined to keep his art, no matter how abstract it would often become, in close touch with the objects of his experience.

In this matter, as in so many others in Davis's career, he remained faithful to the spirit that had nourished his art from the outset. There was a sense in which he never ceased to be a child of the Ashcan School. The Ashcan painters—John Sloan, George Luks, William Glackens, Everett Shinn—were his father's friends and colleagues when Davis was born. His father was the art editor of a Philadelphia newspaper, and his mother was a sculptor. Davis was encouraged to follow the Ashcan painters' example

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from an early age. After a year in high school, he was allowed to enroll in Robert Henri's Art School in New York, then the center of the realists' rebellion against the genteel tradition. "The Henri School," Davis wrote, "was regarded as radical and revolutionary in its methods, and it was. All the usual art school routine was repudiated. Individuality of expression was the keynote. . . . Art was not a matter of rules and techniques, or the search for an absolute ideal of beauty. It was the expression of ideas and emotions about the life of the time." When Davis wrote these lines in 1945, a year after Mondrian's death, did he also have in mind a more recent "search for an absolute ideal of beauty"—that of the pure abstraction he rejected? Perhaps. What remained paramount, anyway, was the idea of an art ineluctably involved with "the life of the time."

It was the Armory Show of 1913 that separated Davis forever from the artistic practices of the Ashcan School, which was now, in comparison with the modernist painting of Europe, seen to be needlessly conservative in its aesthetic outlook, however progressive it might be in its social idealism. It was owing to his encounter with the Armory Show at the age of twenty-one that Davis became a modernist. Yet it is important to remember that his close involvement with the Ashcan School in his youth left some enduring marks on his art. It confirmed a natural taste for low-life subjects and commonplace objects—for Davis, the distinctive features of "the life of the time"—as the principal motifs of his painting. It also stimulated that propensity for pictorial exuberance that was so characteristic of Davis's mature style. Above all, it did much to shape his basic outlook on art and life, which was that of a radical at odds with the prevailing orthodoxies.

It took Davis the better part of a decade to assimilate the innovations that he discovered with so much excitement in the Armory Show, and he produced some marvelous pictures along the way. But it was in the Twenties that he really got going—that he became, so to speak, the Stuart Davis that we know. The "'abstract' kick" was very much in evidence from that time onward, but so was a concentration on clearly delineated common objects—light bulbs, egg-beaters, etc. The complex dance of abstraction and representation was pursued and tested in a variety of directions, with the iconography of advertising and package design often providing a link between them. In the essay that Karen Wilkin has contributed to the catalogue of the Met exhibition—"'Becoming a Modern Artist': The 1920s"—there are two passages that especially illuminate Davis's development in that key decade. In the first she speaks of Davis's preferred subjects.

> . . . Davis extolled the twentieth-century kitchen, with its light bulbs, percolators, egg-beaters, and matchbooks. . . . Some years later, he suggested that his use of "unesthetic material, absurd material, non-arty material," owed something to Marcel Duchamp's example, but for Davis, selecting unlovely, everyday objects as still-life material was also an extension of the training he had received at Robert Henri's school. Like Léger's and Picabia's machine imagery, Davis's domestic hardware was both subject and metaphor, a portable equivalent of his principal theme—modern urban life in all its manifestations—just as the contemporary city was his substitute for traditional landscape.

And in the second passage she speaks of his abstraction and of the role played by drawing in developing it.

> [Davis's] was abstraction based on distillation . . . as [his] careful preparatory drawings show. Their relationship to the paintings derived from them provides a key to Davis's working methods and explains, in part, his pictures' uncanny way of looking at once effortlessly improvised and absolutely immovable. The drawings bear witness to meticulous adjustment of shapes, to weighing of angles and densities, to fine tuning and tinkering with what appears, on canvas, to be a spontaneous,

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> sure departure from observed reality. All evidence of hesitation, doubt, change, and evolution is barred from the finished painting, but the final drawn configuration was not just a preparation; it was a complete, self-sufficient work of art. . . . Color, however subtle, rich, or bright, only clarified the spatial perception that had provoked the original image, and it was mutable in a way that the drawing was not.

The latter passage is the best guide that I know of to everything Davis produced from the Twenties onward—a guide to precisely the kind of abstract painter Davis became—while the former reminds us of the role that the painter's subjects continued to play in the development of that abstraction. It was never the kind of absolutist abstraction that he saw in Mondrian and that he understood had acquired a new ascendancy in the art of Pollock, Rothko, and others. Which was no doubt why, in 1951, at the very moment of that ascendancy, Davis insisted that his interest in abstraction was "practically zero." Clearly he felt that something important to his art would be lost, or misunderstood, if he allowed it to be blurred by the new orthodoxy that was overtaking the scene.

Davis had stood his ground against an earlier orthodoxy in the Thirties, which was one of the things that made him a hero to some of the younger abstractionists of that decade and the next—Ad Reinhardt and David Smith among them. Always a radical of sorts in his politics, Davis was nonetheless adamant in rejecting, on the one hand, the anti-modernist pieties of the Communist Party and its fellow-travelers, and, on the other, the American Scene regionalists with their sentimentalization of life in the rural provinces. As a painter Davis was painting some of his best work in the Thirties, and he was also much involved in left-wing politics, but he resisted all attempts to make his art conform to the political philistinism of the day. This was true even in the mural paintings he produced under the Federal Art Project—paintings that are not only splendid in themselves but that now stand as the finest work to come out of the whole mural project, which for the most part was an aesthetic disaster.

Indeed, the galleries devoted to the Thirties in this retrospective suggest that the time is ripe for a sweeping revaluation of the American art of that decade, in which we have tended to underrate the achievements of the modernists and accord to the regionalists, the romantics, and the social realists a larger place than the quality of their achievement merits. William C. Agee, who collaborated with Lowery S. Sims in organizing the Davis retrospective and who has recently completed the catalogue raisonné of Davis's oeuvre, gave us a glimpse of such a revaluation in an exhibition he mounted at the Whitney Museum in the Sixties. But the powers then in place at the Whitney recoiled in horror at this event—it was, after all, a more serious critique of the Whitney's own activities in the Thirties than Mr. Agee may have intended—and as far as I know, no one has returned to the subject in any comprehensive way.

The Thirties is not the only period that is brilliantly illuminated in this exhibition, which also suggests that the whole "middle" period—if we may call it that—between the first generation of American modernists (Marsden Hartley, John Marin, Arthur Dove, Max Weber, et al.) at the turn of the century and the emergence of the Abstract Expressionists in the Forties is similarly in urgent need of a definitive re-examination. In this "middle" period of American modernism, Davis is obviously one of the two major figures among the painters. Milton Avery is the other, and a comparison would reveal some illuminating affinities and similarities. They are both, I think, far bigger artists than their contemporaries or their immediate posterity fully realized, and we are just beginning to acquire a sense of the scale of their respective achievements. In recent years we have seen a lot of Avery, but there has never been an Avery show on the scale of this Davis retrospective, and this show has had the effect, on this writer anyway, of whet-

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ting one's appetite for such an exhibition.

Davis's troubled attitude toward abstraction further suggests that in any definitive re-examination of this "middle" period in American modernism the whole question of the fate of abstract art is likely to be a compelling issue. For a good many of the most talented members of that first generation of American modernists, abstract art turned out to be a promise and an ideal that was soon repudiated. Hartley dropped out, so did Weber, and so did Morgan Russell, who probably made the most original contribution to abstract painting in his generation of American modernists. This defection allowed Hartley to become an even greater painter in his later years than in his early period, but Weber, Russell, and others weren't so lucky. Something happened to the modernist aspiration in American art in the generation preceding Davis's, and this, too, I think, contributed something to Davis's uncertain attitude toward abstraction even while he was in the process of developing his art in that direction.

It is, in any case, a tribute to the Davis retrospective and to the impressive team of scholars and connoisseurs that the Met has brought together to produce the accompanying catalogue, that it prompts us to raise questions about the whole period that the show encompasses. This exhibition is certainly the most important show of a twentieth-century American artist the Met has ever organized, and it would be nice to think that it marks the beginning of a serious effort at the Met to re-examine the larger history of the period. Not only does such a re-examination require the kind of resources that the Met can command, but it also calls for the kind of disinterested scholarship and connoisseurship—an intellectual discipline devoid of the corrupting ideologies that now disfigure so many attempts at historical revisionism in the art world—which, with only marginal exceptions, the Met has succeeded in marshaling for this occasion. With so many other institutions forfeiting their intellectual integrity to the ghastly new orthodoxies of the day, the Met has given us in this Stuart Davis retrospective a model to respect and to emulate.

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The Sobol report: multiculturalism triumphant

by Heather Mac Donald

The emerging line of defense in the debate over multiculturalism is the charge of "exaggeration." Multiculturalists accuse their critics and the press of overstating their impact and distorting their demands. The opposite is the case. Years before multiculturalism became controversial, its advocates were introducing racial quotas into history writing and literary studies. Public awareness has yet to catch up with the extent to which high-school and college education have already been transformed.

More critically, those who mediate between the activists and the public—the press, educators, and administrators—regularly muffle the more radical aspects of the multiculturalist platform in a blanket of normalizing rhetoric. This ill-conceived diplomacy results in a gap between the public face and the reality of multiculturalism. The debate has been presented in terms of how many pages a history textbook should devote to Cree culture and how many to the Bill of Rights, when what hangs in the balance is our culture's commitment to rationalism and objective standards of knowledge.

A prime example of the repackaging of multicultural extremism as moderate academic reform is the public presentation of the Sobol Committee Report. The Sobol Committee was appointed in 1990 by New York State's Education Commissioner, Thomas Sobol, to review the state's history and social-studies curricula. It was widely understood that the impetus behind the review was the demand to make New York's curriculum more multicultural—the present committee was formed after its predecessor issued a diatribe against Eurocentric education that was too extreme for even the liberal Regents to stomach. The committee presented its findings to New York's Board of Regents in June of 1991; in July, the Regents adopted its recommendations.

The committee's work received extensive coverage in *The New York Times*. A careful reader of our newspaper of record would have come away with the following impressions of the report and its subject matter: First, that the report represents "a new emphasis on multicultural education." While the rest of society has been learning to value non-Eurocentric points of view, New York's history and social-science curricula have remained largely untouched by multiculturalism: in Troy and Schenectady, Columbus still "discovers" America. The *Times*'s coverage left the impression that a new curricular era was dawning in which New York would finally recognize America's cultural diversity, and, in the words of one of the drafters, no longer force individuals to "sacrifice their ethnic identity to be educated."

Second, those who followed coverage of the report in the *Times* would have thought that the report itself is judicious in its diagnosis and reasonable in its remedies, avoiding the racial virulence of the earlier report while paving the way for much-needed

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change. According to the *Times*'s reporter, its "recommendations seem relatively innocuous." The *Times*'s editorialists praised the committee as "scholarly and balanced," and reassured their readers that the report "offers mostly reasonable remedies." Adopting the terminology of one of the report's two dissenters, historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., of the Graduate Center of City University of New York, the *Times* framed the central issue confronting the committee as finding the proper balance between "pluribus" and "unum"—between, that is, cultural diversity and cultural unity. Unlike Schlesinger, however, the paper concluded that the balance had been struck. In fact, the committee had transcended the apparent zero-sum relation between diversity and unity to give us "*more* pluribus [and] *more* unum."[1]

The *Times*'s coverage fits the archetypal narrative pattern of an eruption of disorder followed by the restoration of order. After the first Sobol Committee's report was rejected, it was all but inevitable that the second's would be greeted as the very soul of moderation. However aesthetically satisfying such a denouement may be, in the present instance it is a complete whitewash. The report is radically incoherent. It contradicts itself on nearly every page. Far from representing a "new emphasis on multicultural education," it duplicates a series of reforms that, according to the report itself, have already wreaked havoc on the curriculum. Contrary to the *Times*'s vision of the golden mean between unity and diversity, the report pays only lip service to the value of cultural cohesion. It invokes America's democratic ideals rarely, in boiler-plate, and only as a prelude to criticizing their imperfect realization.

But the most disturbing aspect of the report does not even register on the *Times*'s "pluribus-unum" scales, and is barely alluded to by the paper. The committee proposes unleashing on schoolchildren the relativist theory of knowledge currently in vogue in higher education. This proposal would only increase the already legendary ignorance of American students while providing a fancy theoretical justification for it.

The *Times*'s presentation of the Sobol report typifies the response of the right-thinking elite to the demands of academic and political extremists. The establishment shrinks from pointing out the logical contradictions, racist assumptions, and misrepresentations in those demands, for fear of being branded racist. That fear has resulted in minority-hiring quotas in universities and the professions even though there are insufficient or no qualified minority candidates to fill those quotas; it has given us institutionalized segregation on campus in the form of separate racial student centers, dormitories, graduation ceremonies, and academic programs; and it has led to racial tests of fitness for teaching. It also induces the press to bury racial or racist aspects of current events when those events might reflect poorly on minorities, as witness the recent riots in the Adams Morgan section of Washington, D.C., and in Brooklyn's Crown Heights.

The Sobol Committee report opens on a note of judicious alarm: "By most acceptable standards of fairness and equitable treatment of the many cultural currents in our nation, the existing syllabi are found wanting." The tone is measured, but the message is urgent, and the condemnation sweeping. New York's curriculum embodies a model of cultural assimilation that is no longer acceptable. That model "required" people to "shed their specific cultural differences in order to be considered American." This forced assimilation may once have been necessary "to shape a unified nation." But the civil-rights struggle, the increase in non-European immigration over the last two decades, and the "recognition of our nation's indigenous heritage" have "put [the goal of unification] in question." (The report does not explain why a unified nation is any less important today than before the Sixties.) It may come as a surprise to stu-

1 Emphasis added. The emphases in all other quotations from the Sobol report are in the original.

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dents of the American Constitution, but it is thanks solely to multiculturalism that we are "progressing . . . toward a . . . respect for pluralism." It is in spite, not because, of "mainstream cultural ideals commonly identified as American" that "recent decades" have witnessed the emergence of "a more tolerant, inclusive, and realistic vision of American identity."

Unfortunately, the report continues, New York's curriculum has yet to respond to this breakthrough in democratic values. Its failure to do so has serious educational consequences. The "lack of attention to . . . diversity and the absence of referents to one's indigenous culture in the curriculum" make "the problems of teaching and learning [geography and history] more difficult." The committee therefore calls on the state "to inaugurate a curriculum that reflects the rich cultural diversity of the nation."

The report's drafters apparently believe that frequent repetition is an adequate substitute for corroborating evidence. Having stated their claim that New York's curriculum fails to reflect cultural diversity, they repeat it at least once per page of a sixty-odd-page report. But the examples of the curriculum's alleged insensitivity to cultural diversity are so few and so trivial as to undermine the charge they are intended to support. The most egregious examples of cultural bias are definitional: the use of "Oriental" instead of "Asian," "slave" instead of "enslaved person," the incorporation of Northern Africa into the Middle East, and the occasional use of "Latin America" without the qualification that many Latin American nations "trace their traditions" to Africa, India, and Indonesia.

The report also alleges, without supporting evidence, that the curriculum "inadequately addresses" the loss of lives and culture due to the European colonization of Africa, and that the pre-colonial history of India is "not properly treated." The "focus on celebrations such as Thanksgiving and Columbus Day" in grades kindergarten through 6 shows "disregard . . . for indigenous peoples." The discussions of slavery "frequently omit [its] economic basis," and the syllabi for grades 7-8 and 11 "do not adequately address the incarceration of Japanese Americans" or the deportation of Mexicans in the 1920s. The solution to these curricular enormities is, typically, to study "the shortcomings of U.S. policy."

The final examples of Eurocentrism and other forbidden "isms" require an exquisite sensitivity to slur. The syllabi describe the African continent as possessing "few jungle environments" and consisting of "nearly 45% . . . desert or dry steppe," while Western Europe's environment is described as "exhibit[ing] great diversity in terms of physical geography and climate, [with] easy access to warm water ports." These formulations "betray . . . real bias." The statement that "[i]nventions . . . in the 19th century were often the product of individual genius . . . , including that of lesser known, minority inventors," and the recommendation that students "also examine the roles of women and racial/ethnic minorities" in labor history are racist and sexist because they imply "that all the remaining content must not be about . . . women and people of color."

This last objection poses quite a dilemma. If the only acceptable histories are those which *are* "about" women and people of color, then either we're going to have a drastically slimmed-down history curriculum or we will have to rewrite history entirely from the perspective of those groups. That such a perspective will radically alter the past goes without saying. Since, for example, an analysis of the drafting and ratifying of the U.S. Constitution would "not be about" women and people of color, would it belong in a multicultural curriculum? Likely one could slip it in via the diary of a delegate's wife, or by focusing on the slavery question. But finding a multicultural hook for the doings of other dead white males will not always be so easy.

The hair-splitting quality of the examples suggests that the allegations of Eurocentric bias and cultural exclusion in New York's

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curriculum are unfounded. Most of the criticism is directed at the depth of treatment of multicultural topics, not at their exclusion. But the amazing thing about the Sobol report is that it refutes itself. It explicitly contradicts its central thesis that New York's curriculum lacks a multicultural perspective. It acknowledges that the Regents have issued an annual statement supporting multicultural education for the last twenty years, and that the curriculum was completely overhauled in 1989 in accordance with the multicultural imperative. So successful were those most recent revisions that the curriculum simply buckled under the additional weight. The curriculum now contains "too much subject matter." It presents "ever-increasing amounts of information, without adequate organizing and supporting frameworks."

There is a certain poignancy in the authors' account of their self-created dilemma. To correct the "tendency to tell the story of U.S. and global history from the perspective of males and whites, . . . we quickly began to add important information about women and people of color." But then the multicultural principle demanded its toll: "We must [then] in fairness go to [*sic*] lists of contributions of the many other national, ethnic, religious, cultural and other groups; and as we did so, it became clear that this encyclopedic approach would never fit in the syllabus, let alone the classroom." Though one may be sure that the multicultural principle was never taken to so absurd a length as to encompass Western European "ethnic, religious, and cultural groups," its application to more politically correct groups defeated its own purpose: "It [did] not serve the fundamental goal of helping students of all backgrounds and abilities understand and appreciate the concept of cultural diversity within national identity. In this sense, *the information-dominant approach to the social studies curriculum fails as a vehicle for multicultural education in the same way it fails in a full treatment of any other topic.*"

The picture of an already overloaded multicultural curriculum that emerges from the Sobol Committee report matches the conclusions reached in 1983 by Harvard sociologist Nathan Glazer and Tufts historian Reed Ueda. In a study of six major American-history textbooks, *Ethnic Groups in History Textbooks*, Glazer and Ueda exploded the myth that textbooks remain bastions of Eurocentrism. They found that blacks and Hispanics received over four times as much coverage as European immigrant groups, which are treated as a monolithic entity. African and Native American civilizations are portrayed as creative, in harmony with nature, peaceful, and cooperative, whereas European cultures are vicious and aggressive, and, moreover, they have allegedly suffered from their ignorance of minority cultures. The authors charged that by representing the United States as "exploitative, unequal, and almost unredeemable in its general nastiness," the typical multicultural textbook obscures the "considerable institutional and social achievements of the American polity." Were the study conducted today, its conclusions would only be bleaker.

The report's answer to the educational failure created by multiculturalism's success is breathtaking in its simplicity. Since it is impossible to master all the gender, race, ethnic, and sexual information that multiculturalism suddenly makes relevant to world history, the solution is obvious—discard the mastery of information as one of education's goals: "It is recommended that the approach to the social studies, K-12, shift the emphasis from the mastery of information to the development of fundamental tools, concepts, and intellectual processes that make people learners who can approach knowledge in a variety of ways and struggle with the contradictions." Rather than calling into question the use of education as therapy, the panel rejects whatever in the traditional concept of education is incompatible with that use. The authors assert that their educational program is motivated not by expediency, but by profound epistemological changes: "The nature of our knowledge and the criteria for being judged an educated person are changing . . . . [W]e are beginning to

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realize that understanding and the ability to appreciate things from more than one perspective may be as important as is factual knowledge in the goals of education."

There is much that is ludicrous in this proposal. Surely foremost is the suggestion that in an age when Americans' ignorance of history and geography is nearly complete, schools de-emphasize the "mastery of information" even further. The report is a textbook case of rationalizing the real: since students know nothing anyway, let's declare that the mission of education is not the acquisition of knowledge, but rather the "development of fundamental tools," etc.

But almost equally silly is the notion that grammar- and high-school students are ready to sit down with the high priests of poststructuralism and postmodernism for a big meal of linguistic skepticism and epistemological relativism: "The subject matter content should be *treated as socially constructed* and therefore tentative—as is all knowledge." Eight- and fourteen-year-olds want answers to their questions; after being told a few times that there are no answers, but just different social constructs, they will stop asking questions in the first place.

The *Times* barely alluded to the committee's recommendation that our schools shift from "information-based" to "conceptual" education. The two co-chairmen, psychologist Edmund W. Gordon of Yale University and Francis Roberts, Superintendent of Schools, Cold Springs Harbor School District, considered it important enough, however, to merit fuller treatment in a separate statement appended to the report. Gordon and Roberts argue that knowledge of history (or, as they disparagingly put it, "consensus history") is not an "intellectual competency" necessary for democratic government. Nor is "training in established traditions, values and beliefs." Rather, a civic education should "occur in the context of exposure to diverse opinions, multiple perspectives and situated histories, where the learning tasks involve comparative analysis, contextual validation, heuristic exploration and judicious reflection." It is not easy to guess what this prescription might mean for, say, a fifth-grade teacher of the Civil War. But there is no ambiguity about what the report is ruling out—an intensive study of the history of liberal democracy.

Gordon and Roberts's claim that such a study is not necessary for democratic participation is without merit. Constitutional government is not self-sustaining. It requires citizens who care enough about it to preserve it. But the concepts of the rule of law, limited government, and individual rights cannot be fully understood or appreciated apart from their history. People with little or no knowledge of how those concepts emerged from the tradition of absolute monarchy are less than ideal guardians.

Gordon and Roberts acknowledge that not everyone on the Sobol Committee shared the majority's low opinion of "hegemonic" knowledge: "Although we were generally in agreement that histories tend to reflect the interests and perspectives of those who write them, there was a ubiquitous undercurrent of concern for the recognition of historical and other truth." Such "undercurrents," however antiquated and regrettable, pose an obstacle to the march of multiculturalism: "It may well be that it is this concern for truth that will be most difficult to reconcile with our conception of education as being directed at the development of intellect and understanding." Multiculturalism, in other words, is incompatible with a commitment to truth and knowledge. The two co-chairmen explain the problem with "facts [and] knowledge structures": they are "insufficient and often so situation bound as to limit their utility in understanding and problem solving." We have recently seen what such jettisoning of "facts and knowledge" leads to in practice. Many people, including attorney William Kunstler, held that it was irrelevant whether Tawana Brawley had actually been abducted and raped by a group of white men—the fact that the story had "contextual validity" and was compatible with the "situated knowledge" of many blacks was sufficient to validate it and

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confer upon it political power. A similar indifference to fact spurred the recent rioting in Crown Heights over the death of a black child struck by a motorcade escorting the Hassidic Grand Rabbi. The rioters asserted that the child was ignored by both city and Jewish paramedics, but neutral eyewitnesses confirmed that the child did receive medical help at the scene of the accident. The rioters chose to ignore that evidence, because the story of preferential treatment for Jews and of Jewish indifference to black suffering matched their preconceptions, or, in the terminology of the Sobol report, their "interests and perspectives." In 1989, a New York Regent, Adelaide L. Sanford, accused current Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch of having grandparents who owned African slave ships. Ravitch informed Sanford that her grandparents were poor Jews in Poland, not ship owners. Rather than apologizing for the slur, Sanford defended it on the ground that she was "speaking ethnically." Truth does not matter when ethnicity is at play.

The growing popularity among blacks of conspiracy theories to explain the spread of AIDS, drugs, and violence in the inner city also reveals a willingness to substitute for facts plausibility based on fit with one's "situated knowledge."

These cases reveal a frightening chasm between white and black standards of credible evidence, refutation, and verification. The Sobol Committee's disdain for facts can only open that chasm wider. Though the report offers relativism as a way of defusing racial tensions and increasing understanding between cultures, in fact it can only exacerbate such tensions. In denigrating the appeal to objective truth as a relic of outmoded thinking or a tool of hegemonic control, the report destroys the only ground on which cultural mistrust and animosities can be resolved—the middle ground of reason. If that ground is denied, then the only way to resolve disputes is through physical or political force.

The report itself provides a not very reassuring demonstration of "multiple perspectives" in action. Just as it undermined its claim about the curriculum's lack of multicultural content with its acknowledgment that the excess of existing multicultural content has led to incoherence, so does it violate its own solution for that incoherence by constantly calling for the addition of ever more multicultural data to counter the curriculum's "limited range of examples." The drafters are like addicts who have vowed to break their habit but cannot resist the first temptation that crosses their path. Let some officially recognized victim wave its hat on the horizon and they rush to bring it into the curricular fold, despite their own condemnation of such piecemeal pedagogy.

There is also considerable incongruity between the committee's educational and political philosophy and its exercise of power. Though it endlessly reiterates its commitment to "diversity" and its opposition to "hegemonic" knowledge and power, in practice it has little tolerance for diversity and local autonomy. It displays the usual multiculturalist disdain for local school boards and teachers, whom it accuses of derailing the multicultural agenda. To prevent that abuse in the future, it demands that all local school boards adopt a resolution in favor of multiculturalism. They must also institute "attitude"-retraining programs for staff at all levels, including bus drivers and clerical workers. Such programs would inculcate "attitudes supportive of the proposed changes" such as "the beliefs that (a) diversity is desirable, [and] (b) both the content and the process of teaching should reflect and respond to diversity."

The proposal to shift from an "information-based" to a "conceptual" education has at least the advantage of being so vague and hedged round by contradictions that it is likely to founder in execution. But the report contains another proposal that is perhaps an even more ominous threat to education, for it is much easier to implement. The committee takes aim not just at the content of textbooks, but at their very role in the classroom: A "multicultural education with

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multiple perspectives requires that we . . . *move away* from focusing on textbooks as the major sources, a practice that unfortunately treats other, non-text materials as supplementary rather than essential." Among the "non-text materials" which are now to be put on a par with books are "pictures and posters, updated maps that accurately portray the sizes of land masses, videos, music, books that are not texts, inexpensive artifacts and woven materials." This is a fascinating list, full of surprises and enigmas. It is a revelation to learn that Western cartography has been inaccurately portraying land masses all these years. Even more puzzling is the riddle of "books that are not texts." Only three solutions come to mind: comic books, pop-up books, and *Pat the Bunny*. The meaning of "inexpensive artifacts" and "woven materials" is clearer. These are undoubtedly euphemisms for African crafts of the sort which Georgia State University educational psychologist Asa Hilliard III, consultant to the Sobol Committee, peddles at conferences on Afrocentric education. It is unlikely that samples of eighteenth-century brocades from Lyons will be an integral part of the multicultural classroom; Surinam quilts could well be. Note that the report does not call for the *introduction* of these non-text materials into the classroom. Apparently their role in the curriculum is already secure. Rather, consistent with their practice of pushing their demands to the limit, the drafters want the status of non-text materials to be elevated to the equivalent of books.

The committee offers no rationale for this proposal (to which the *Times* devotes only one line), but the denigration of the book is already official policy among the politically correct. The incoming president of the Modern Language Association, University of Pennsylvania professor Houston Baker, views reading and writing as "technologies of control," and charges that literacy perpetuates "Western hegemonic arrangements of knowledge." It is difficult to decide which is more surreal—the head of the nation's literature professors trashing reading or the leaders of a barely literate school population adopting a proposal to replace the already spectral presence of books in the classroom with videos and other amusements.

From a politically correct perspective, there are several problems with books. First, the West's principal philosophical and political ideas have been transmitted by writing. If you want to suppress Western culture, you've got to start with the book. Books play a far less important role, if any, in the Native American and African cultures which have been nominated to supplant Western dominance. The second problem with books is that minorities have an even harder time reading them than whites. On the same principle that rejects as biased tests on which minorities score lower than whites, there must be something wrong with reading, if illiteracy among blacks and Hispanics is high. Rather than requiring more reading to correct the problem, we destroy the offending evidence so that we can perpetuate the myth of absolute equality of achievement among the races and cultures.

Unfortunately, the recommendation to de-emphasize books is almost superfluous. Textbooks have already mutated into something akin to the "non-text materials" that the report champions. Pictures have replaced narrative—in the books Glazer and Ueda examined, no two consecutive pages of text lacked an illustration. In an otherwise sympathetic review of California's just-completed textbook revisions, a reporter for *The New York Times*'s Sunday magazine compared the look of the new multicultural textbooks to *USA Today*.

How will the substitution of "woven materials and inexpensive artifacts" for books, of "situational concepts" for facts, and of gender and disability studies for American political history affect the knowledge and skills of New York's students? We will never know for sure. The report calls for the development of "appropriate and relevant assessment procedures" that are "supportive of the goals and purposes of the revised social sciences curriculum, and

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reflective of the diversity of the student population." In other words, testing procedures, too, must conform to the multicultural agenda. They must be purged of anything that smacks of Western imperialism and racism, such as the valuation of literacy, communication skills, rationality, and historical knowledge. Instead, assessment procedures should measure both "canonical and non-canonical knowledge and techniques" and "identify from indigenous experiences examples of core concepts, knowledge and skills." They must assess "competence in knowledge, skill and understanding that is not dependent on communicative competence in a single language."

These vague prescriptions set the stage for a reprise of the charade that has played itself out again and again across the multicultural landscape. Any test that yields a politically unpalatable result must be revised until it yields the proper one. In the process, the definition of essential knowledge inevitably changes. Our society has turned the purpose of testing completely on its head. We no longer use tests to evaluate achievement or competence for a position, but rather to rubber-stamp a result pre-ordained by politics. As our population grows ever more illiterate and uneducated, tests, too, will be dumbed down to conceal that fact. It would be a lot cheaper to simply do away with testing altogether and openly institute the quotas for which tests now front.

One of the most puzzling and disheartening events in the wake of the Sobol report is the reincarnation of Nathan Glazer as apologist for the academic Left. Glazer served on the Sobol Committee, a position for which his classic study of American ethnicity, *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963), co-authored with Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and his 1983 study of multiculturalism eminently qualified him. But the Glazer of those two works bears little resemblance to the Glazer that has recently emerged.

Reading Glazer's preface to the second edition of *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1970) is like entering a time warp. He decries the complicity of the white intelligentsia in the self-defeating demands of black militants, such as the dismantling of the meritocratic admissions system at City College. Long before the ironies of the black-only schools movement, he warns against rejecting the Northern model of ethnic incorporation in favor of Southern separatism. While acknowledging the right to celebrate black culture, he finds the rejection of the mechanisms by which varied groups participate in the common state "frightening." And while granting that there is a place for ethnic studies as a form of self-celebration and group reassurance, he calls for "a true, historical, sociological effort." He cautions that "the results will not be welcomed." But, he concludes, "the effort is necessary if we are to acquire a deeper understanding of ourselves and a better capacity to determine the future."

By the time of the Sobol Committee report, a transformation in Glazer's outlook had occurred. He had initially planned to dissent from the report, but ultimately signed on and appended a comment instead. Adopting the *Times*'s approach, he praises the report for having avoided the extremes of "forceful Americanization and assimilation" on the one hand and a "parcelling out of American history into a different and incompatible story for each group" on the other. His acknowledgment that "the first danger is scarcely a present one" is an understatement, if ever there was one. Merely to raise "forceful Americanization" as a possibility resurrects the very myth about Eurocentric curricular bias that Glazer's own research exploded. Glazer's only misgiving about the report is that it "offers some support" to the "danger of the hypostatization of race, ethnic group, culture, people."

Glazer's upbeat evaluation of the report is a far cry from his earlier debunking of the multiculturalist platform. But his comments still leave one unprepared for his article in the September 2, 1991, *New Republic*, subtitled, "Why the Sobol Commission Was Right." Glazer there abandons principle in favor of political accommodation. He adopts the position that if enough people

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are clamoring for a policy, however misguided, it would be churlish to oppose it on such weak grounds as educational excellence or a respect for history.

The article is a strange mix of honesty and complacency. He points out that the real impetus for multiculturalism is the low academic and economic achievement of American blacks. Multiculturalism has few advocates among immigrant groups, who would for the most part be content with the Anglo-American education that past immigrants received.

Glazer admits outright that "in the big cities, in many schools, an unbalanced, indeed distorted view of American and world history is prevailing." His response to that distortion is to shrug his shoulders and invoke demographics:

> [W]hen set against the reality of majorities of black and Latino students in these schools, the political dominance of black and Latino administrators, the weak preparation of teachers and administrators in history, and the responsiveness of textbook administrators to organized pressure, the weight of the truth of history, as determined by the best scholars, is reduced to only one interest.

Glazer poses the question: "What does one do in the face of these [demographic and political] trends?", and answers: "One thing is to fight the errors, distortions, untruths, imbalances," as did "some of the comments attached to the report." He is obviously not very impressed by that option. He castigates the "sharper critics of the report" for "fail[ing] to recognize that demographic and political pressures change the history that is to be taught." It is unlikely, however, that the two dissenters, Professor Schlesinger and historian Kenneth T. Jackson of Columbia, are blind to the demographic changes that are fueling the rewriting of history. But unlike Glazer, they do not mistake the actual for the inevitable.

For those of us who are not so easy with the prospect of rewriting history to suit the alleged emotional needs of minorities, Glazer offers the following consolation: "While multiculturalism and Afrocentrism race ahead in some schools and systems, others may happily continue to be the schools many of us remember and approve of, with only some modest modifications to prepare students for tests with a surprisingly high content of questions dealing with blacks and women, and particularly black women." This solution borders on the cynical. If one version of history is truer to fact than another, why should only some children be exposed to it, while others receive convenient myth? And such disparate presentations of history guarantee an explosive clash in the future. When students who were taught, inter alia, that Graeco-Roman civilization was ripped off from black Egyptians discover that the rest of society does not share their view, will they, in the spirit of the Sobol report, attribute the difference to "multiple perspectives and situated histories"? Unlikely. Instead, they will see a racist conspiracy, and their alienation will only grow.

If this promise of a dual educational system fails to satisfy, Glazer tries a stronger claim:

> The skeletal structure [of American history] will remain, because we still live under the polity established by the Constitution, and it is in that polity, under that Constitution, that racial and ethnic and minority groups and women seek to expand their rights. It will be quite a job to keep nonsense and exaggeration and mindless ethnic and racial celebration out of the schools, but the basic structure of instruction in history will survive.

Glazer assumes that because the groups advocating revisionist history avail themselves of Constitutional rights, they will somehow be either unable or unwilling to alter American history. But the more extreme of the Afrocentrists are hostile to the American polity and the Constitution, so even if they are "in it," how does that limit their ability to rewrite history? The only limits on that

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ability are political. If the multiculturalists amassed enough power, they could find not just Iroquois but Egyptian influence on the Constitution as well.

However dubious Glazer's rationalizations of multiculturalism, his predictions about its likely course are wholly persuasive. Despite the multiculturalists' furious posturing as underdogs, their grip on the educational agenda is firm. Since their power depends on the stridency of their demands, however, they dare not acknowledge their own success—hence the paradoxes of the Sobol report, simultaneously berating the curriculum for lack of diversity while struggling to cope with the problems created by the surfeit of diversity.

What is finally at stake in the attack on the curriculum and canon is not only the truth of history and the viability of political union, but the grounds of human understanding as well. In a forum on multiculturalism in *The New York Times*, Stanford anthropologist Renato Rosaldo posed to the reader what he obviously considered a patently absurd situation: a typical California class of Asian-Americans, African-Americans, native Americans, and Chicanos, asked to "learn our heritage . . . from Plato and Aristotle to Milton and Shakespeare." Rosaldo asked: "Must [our students] continue to look into the curricular mirror and see nothing?" The question is chilling. To say that Plato, Aristotle, Shakespeare, and Milton offer "nothing" to an ethnically diverse class is to say that ideas are nothing, that complex, sensuous language is nothing, that acts of imagination that explore the most fundamental human dilemmas are nothing, and that the only things that are not nothing are race and ethnicity.

The multicultural principle cuts both ways, however. If an African-American can not be expected to see anything in Milton, how can a white student be expected to see anything in Frantz Fanon or Alice Walker? And how can they see anything in each other? Despite this inexorable tendency toward cultural apartheid, multiculturalists loudly proclaim themselves the first theorists to value the "Other." They thereby expose their own ignorance. The Renaissance humanists, for example, discovered in the classical world a pre-Christian Other, whose vision of politics and ethics deeply challenged the medieval order. Their struggle to understand that classical Other has provided us with a tradition of engaged scholarship that makes a mockery of multiculturalism's shallow theorizing. The passion with which they approached their study is embodied in Petrarch's Letters to the Ancients. In an act of supreme hermeneutic imagination, Petrarch wrote loving letters to the classical authors, questioning, sometimes criticizing, them, struggling to overcome the distance that separated himself from them.

Multiculturalism's pigeonholing of authors and historical actors by race and gender is antithetical to this humanist tradition. It elevates ignorance and philistinism to a moral principle. No one who has caught even a glimmer of the complexity of Plato and Milton could reduce them to coefficients of race and gender. But students have always sought tools for simplifying the past, for reducing its vastness to a manageable scale. Deconstruction was particularly appealing, because negation always seems more powerful than affirmation. Multiculturalism continues in deconstruction's tradition of negation, but cuts a wider swath. With a single slogan, such as "Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western culture's got to go!", students can dismiss an entire civilization. The effect is intoxicating. Yet it is a high that will leave us spiritually impoverished. Our public and private language is becoming increasingly inarticulate. When our language shrinks, so does our world. The works of Western civilization offer not just the foundations of liberalism but voices of unparalleled eloquence and beauty. They challenge us to respond. By silencing them we are ultimately silencing ourselves.

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Il caso Lampedusa

by Christopher Carduff

To read Lampedusa's great novel, *The Leopard*—that ironic and nostalgic story about a prince by a prince, about a once-distinguished and always-prodigal family by the last of just such a family—is to wonder, as with Proust or *A Portrait of the Artist*, where the autobiography ends and the fiction begins. Who is Don Fabrizio Salina, the Leopard of the book's title? Is he, as many have speculated, an *hommage* to Giulio Tomasi, the author's great-grandfather, the Prince of Lampedusa during the days of Garibaldi? Or is he actually a veiled portrait of the author himself? Is *The Leopard* a historical novel about the passing of the old regime in Sicily in the 1860s or is it, as certain Italian intellectuals have charged, an out-dated aristocrat's "right-wing" "reactionary" screed against the "progressive" modern Italian state? These questions—and many, many others about the author's politics, literary antecedents, and very private life—were the stuff of international controversy when, some thirty years ago, the book appeared out of nowhere, the posthumous masterpiece of an obscure, impoverished nobleman who had published virtually nothing during his lifetime. The Italians had a name for all the spilt ink: they called it *il caso Lampedusa*. The hubbub has long since died away and *The Leopard* has assumed its place among the modern classics, yet the mystery surrounding the world of its author continues to intrigue. It is David Gilmour's achievement throughout *The Last Leopard*, his excellent, brief biography of Lampedusa, to shed new light on all aspects of that world.[1]

After a visit to Sicily in 1985, during which he picked among the ruins of the novelist's childhood homes, Mr. Gilmour, an Edinburgh-based journalist and literary critic, resolved to write a book about Lampedusa, to untangle the strands of fact and fiction in his work. He had little hope of doing an "authorized life," for Lampedusa's widow, who jealously guarded his personal papers, had turned away all would-be biographers from the day of *The Leopard*'s publication, in 1958, to the day of her death, in 1982. Mr. Gilmour expected similar trouble from the current executor—the Lampedusas' adopted son, Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi—but upon meeting each other, in 1987, the two became instant friends. Mr. Lanza Tomasi took him in as a guest at his house in Palermo, the house where Lampedusa spent his last and most productive decade. There Mr. Gilmour was presented with "documents which had not been seen since Lampedusa's death: the diaries of the last years, . . . letters, unpublished essays, a commonplace book," and, most remarkable and important, "the thousand-page survey of English literature which Lampedusa had written for a small group of pupils near the end of his life." In short, he had struck a biographi-

1 *The Last Leopard: A Life of Giuseppe di Lampedusa*, by David Gilmour; Pantheon, 223 pages, $22.

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cal motherlode, material he has now orchestrated to great effect and with what, in this age of "pathography," can only be called great good taste. There is nothing about Mr. Gilmour of the "publishing scoundrel," eager to dish out the dirt and, by implication, prove himself and his readers superior to his subject. He is, indeed, that rather old-fashioned thing, a "publishing gentleman," a biographer sympathetic to the troubles of the man and even-handed with the work of the artist. It is a distinctly British type, and one for which the Anglophilic Lampedusa, a connoisseur of such types, had a keen appreciation. It is easy, upon finishing this book and having learned something about his own taste in literature, to imagine Lampedusa taking pleasure in it and its rare combination of discretion, understatement, and a plain-meat-and-drink prose style.

Giuseppe Tomasi, the future Duke of Palma and Prince of Lampedusa, was born in 1896, an only child with the run of a palace in the very heart of old Palermo. The palazzo was built in the 1620s, not long after the ancient family had moved from the Italian mainland to Sicily. The origins of the Tomasi are lost in legend—they were happy to believe their line was founded by Thomaso the Leopard, commander of the Imperial Guard under Tiberius—but their career in Sicily is richly documented. By the mid-1600s, they had established themselves as dukes of Palma, a town they had helped to settle on the southern coast, and in 1667 became princes of Lampedusa, which Mr. Gilmour describes as "a largely barren and usually deserted island nearer Africa than Sicily." The sale of the latter property to the Bourbons in 1840 proved a windfall for the debt-ridden Tomasi, although an inordinate amount of the proceeds went to fireworks for Palermo city festivals. As Mr. Gilmour observes, "Nearly all the later members of the Lampedusa family combined financial incompetence with a total lack of interest in even attempting to make money." Lampedusa himself never trained for a profession and lived a life of rather down-at-the-heels leisure; his income was fixed, his indulgences modest, and most of his mornings spent struggling over the legal problems that had tied up the family's wealth for decades.

Lampedusa's earliest memory was of the sight of his mother, the fashionable and highly cultivated Beatrice Mastogiovanni Tasca, combing her hair with the help of a maid; his fondest memories remained always of the "uncountable" rooms of the Palazzo Lampedusa. Although he later married and made a home with his wife, the palace and his mother were the two great loves of his life—and the eventual loss of them his greatest personal tragedy. Shortly before his death, in two lines that capture his longing for both of his now-gone loves, Lampedusa wrote that "until a few months before its destruction [by Allied bombs in 1943] I used to sleep in the room where I was born, five yards away from the spot where my mother's bed had stood when she gave me birth. And in that house, in that very room maybe, I was glad to feel the certainty of dying." For the aging Lampedusa, childhood—the world of the palace and his mother—was "a lost Earthly Paradise," and death his only possibility of regaining it.

The chief source of information about Lampedusa's earliest years is his abandoned memoir, "Places of My Infancy," begun in the summer of 1955.[2] The introductory chapters of Mr. Gilmour's book are in part a re-

2 Lampedusa's memoir, and two works of fiction written after *The Leopard*—the masterly fantasy "Lighea" ("The Professor and the Mermaid") and the first chapter of an unfinished novel, *The Blind Kittens*—were included in *Two Stories and Memoir* (1962). This invaluable if incomplete translation of Lampedusa's *Racconti*, like the 1960 English version of *Il Gattopardo*, is the work of Archibald Colquhoun; together the two books make up the handy one-volume edition of Lampedusa's writings in the newly revived Everyman's Library (Knopf, 300 pages, $15). This omnibus, simply but misleadingly titled *The Leopard*, carries an introduction by Mr. Gilmour.

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hearsal of this charming work, especially in its descriptions of the Palazzo Lampedusa and of Santa Margherita, his mother's family's country palace some forty miles southwest of Palermo. What is new here is Mr. Gilmour's portrait of Beatrice di Lampedusa, and the account of her extraordinary influence over her son. Although Lampedusa received his sense of family history and pride from his father, the two were never close; he received his cultural education from his mother, a woman brought up, Mr. Gilmour writes, "in a far more enlightened and European way" than her husband. (Beatrice was indeed so impressively intelligent and articulate that "long after her death it was rumored [among many who had known her] that she was the real author of *The Leopard* and that her son had merely found and corrected the manuscript.") It was she who arranged for young Giuseppe's education at home and who personally taught him French; it was in her and her family's libraries that Lampedusa acquired a love for reading as he browsed through almost every work of the Enlightenment, numerous Napoleonic War histories, and the novels of such modern writers as Zola and Verga.

But Beatrice di Lampedusa's relationship with her son was hardly entirely wholesome. Mr. Gilmour calls it "perhaps excessively close," and this is perhaps excessively kind. Beatrice was more than merely over-protective, she was domineering, interfering, and uninterested in any happiness for her son that she could not give him herself. She was, in short, a monster, and her behavior toward her child monstrous.

This is nowhere more evident than in Mr. Gilmour's account of the events surrounding Lampedusa's wedding. His wife-to-be was one Alessandra Wolf, known as Licy, a stepdaughter of his paternal uncle Pietro. (Her father was a Latvian baron of German origin who had died in the Russian Revolution; after his death, she, unlike the rest of her family, remained in Riga to see after his huge estate.) Licy, whom Lampedusa first met in 1925, was a "handsome and intelligent woman with a formidable personality . . . a linguist with a wide knowledge of European literature"—that is, a woman in many ways not unlike his mother. She was also, quite extraordinarily, a practicing Freudian psychoanalyst, trained in Berlin and Vienna.

In 1932, when Lampedusa proposed to her, Licy was already married. Their wedding plans were made in secret, not only because Licy had to arrange her divorce, but because Lampedusa knew his mother did not approve of her. "A serious-minded and rather imperious woman, already thirty-seven, [Licy] cannot have seemed an ideal daughter-in-law to Beatrice," writes Mr. Gilmour. But what woman could? Mr. Gilmour mentions that in the 1920s, Lampedusa had been engaged twice—"to an Italian girl and an English girl"—but that all details of these early romances, and of the reasons for their breaking off, are unknown. Mr. Gilmour speculates that, especially in his youth, Lampedusa "was shy and tentative with girls his own age" and so asked to be excused from these relationships; there is also the rumor that Lampedusa was impotent. But nowhere does the biographer suggest the obvious —that Lampedusa broke off these previous engagements for fear of his mother's disapproval.

Lampedusa was married in August 1932, and postponed telling his mother until his wedding day. That morning, from a hotel in Riga, he wrote her an anxious letter declaring his love for Licy but pretending the wedding was still some months away. This letter, and another written days later petitioning for a reply to the first, would make pathetic reading from a boy of eighteen; Lampedusa was then thirty-five. "I beg you," he wrote, "I know you wish me well, I know very well that all your thoughts are for me, but I beg you not to let yourself be carried away by a moment of irrational anger"; "One word from you will be enough to give us happiness that would move you if you could see it"; "I beg you to reflect before compromising a future so full of good omens with a thoughtless gesture." Lampedusa knew exactly what was to befall him by marrying

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Licy: he'd become, as Mr. Gilmour puts it, "the battleground over which two powerful characters, his wife and his mother, would wage a long and acerbic battle."

His women didn't disappointment him. When the newlyweds expressed their desire to begin their life together in an apartment in Palermo, Beatrice made it clear that she "did not wish to deprive herself of her son," and that they must come live with her. This was tried for a while, with predictably disastrous results:

> As Giuseppe had feared, [Licy] quarrelled almost immediately with Beatrice, and the bitterness between the two women was so great that it soon became clear that there was not enough room for the both of them in the Palazzo Lampedusa. . . . [Giuseppe] struggled vainly to keep the peace and stuck more or less with his mother. Within a year of their marriage, Licy had settled back in Latvia, returning to Palermo only for brief periods each year. Not until she was forced to leave the Baltic during the Second World War did she agree to live again in Sicily.

Perhaps she would have settled elsewhere had it been within her means, or had her nemesis, Beatrice, been in better health. At any rate, it was not until 1945, thirteen years after their wedding and mere months before his mother's death, that the Prince and Princess of Lampedusa made a home together that was truly their own, in an apartment on Palermo's Via Butera.

In 1945, Lampedusa was nearing fifty and had little more than a decade left to him. Fully half of Mr. Gilmour's book is devoted to these last years, and this feels right, for it is only then, after he'd ceased to be a professional son and caretaker of an estate, that Lampedusa turned his full attention toward literature. It had always been something more to him than a mere diversion; it had been his intellectual passion and, in his solitude, his greatest consolation. But in these years it became something even greater: a vocation and, at last, a commitment.

Lampedusa read everything, and all of it, except for Russian novels, in the original. As a child he had learned to read Italian, French, and German, and in his teens acquired English. By his middle twenties he had read all of Shakespeare, who would prove a lifelong obsession: Lampedusa thought him not only "the greatest poet who ever lived" but "the most glorious name in the history of humanity." (It was the Bard, significantly, who provided the subject of small talk on Lampedusa's first walks with Licy.) English literature was for Lampedusa "a solid block, without those crevices, those abeyances of talent which are so painful to behold" in other literatures. Besides Shakespeare, English could boast of Dr. Johnson ("the quintessential Londoner" and thus the very embodiment of English civilization) and Dickens (Lampedusa packed *The Pickwick Papers* whenever he traveled the way some people pack a Bible). There were also Marlowe, Keats, and Hopkins; Fielding, Sterne, and Emily Brontë; and, most recently, Eliot, Woolf, Waugh, and Forster. After the English, Lampedusa admired the French, but more selectively, writing off the entire eighteenth century as well as most of the nineteenth. In French there were, above all others, Montaigne ("the spirit of the Renaissance in its supreme state of distillation") and Stendhal (Lampedusa could never decide whether *The Red and the Black* or *The Charterhouse of Parma* was the greatest novel in any language).

Of the literature of his own Italy, Lampedusa thought little, with the exception of Petrarch, Leopardi, Montale, and a handful of others. Italian writers, said Lampedusa, lack the single greatest virtue of the English people, namely a sense of humor. Even worse, they are *di campanile*—i.e., provincial—and so are their readers. (Lampedusa used to illustrate this point by recalling a woman who was returning to Palermo with him by car "after an absence of *two* days. On reaching Port Felice she made the sign of the Cross and thanked the Lord for allowing her to see her native city once more ['*O tu,*

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Palermo, terra adorata']. How is it possible that this lady could ever be interested in Conrad, who for twenty years wandered around the Pacific, or Kipling, who spent half his time between London and India?") But worst of all, Italians have no taste for subtlety in art. This explains their mania for opera, which, wrote Lampedusa,

> began immediately after the Napoleonic wars and spread with giant steps. For more than a hundred years, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of Italians went to the opera, in the great cities for eight months a year . . . And they saw tyrants killed, lovers committing suicide, generous clowns, multiparous nuns and every sort of nonsense dished out in front of them in a continual whirling of cardboard boots, plaster-cast chickens, leading ladies with blackened faces and devils springing out of the ground making awful grimaces. All this synthesized, without psychological passages, without developments, all bare, crude, brutal and irrefutable . . . [It] was passed off as Art, as real Art, and horrors! sometimes it really was Art. The cancer had absorbed all the artistic energies of the nation: Music was Opera, Drama was Opera, Painting was Opera. [When the] mania diminished after 1910, Italian intellectual life was like a field in which locusts had spent a hundred years in a row.

In the wake of Rossini, Donizetti, and Verdi, how could one expect an Italian to respond to the muted artistry of, say, Jane Austen? One couldn't. Because of all this "noisy foolishness," said Lampedusa, Italy had become "the nation least interested in literature that exists, fed up . . . with opera, but unready to listen to anything else."

As a young man of thirty, Lampedusa published three articles in a little Genoese journal—an essay on Paul Morand, another on Yeats, and a review of a biography of Julius Caesar. He did not continue to write for publication, however, perhaps because he thought it vain to address a "deaf" Italian public. Instead he read every afternoon and made copious notes on his reading, mostly in cafés, usually alone, over numerous pastries (Lampedusa was no small man). His mornings were spent browsing in bookshops, and many of his evenings spent reading aloud, from favorite authors, to Licy.

It was Licy who made, in the early 1950s, a suggestion that would change his life. She had long realized that, in the presence of strangers, indeed even of loved ones, her shy and tongue-tied husband could relax only when the subject was literature. Lampedusa had made a few young friends in the cafés of Palermo for whom he enjoyed holding forth on books and writers, and Licy proposed that he organize his thoughts into an informal series of lectures for their benefit. It was no sooner proposed than begun, and between the end of 1953 and January 1955, three nights a week at six o'clock sharp, Lampedusa conducted a course on English literature at his apartment on the Via Butera. In preparation for his talks, writes Mr. Gilmour, "[h]e wrote over a thousand pages on British writers from Bede to Graham Greene," the most concentrated stretch of work he had yet done in his life.

"Lampedusa was knowledgeable about literary currents but despised critics," writes Mr. Gilmour. "The only four . . . who escaped his scorn were Hazlitt, Lamb, Sainte-Beuve and De Sanctis." One wonders, however, what Lampedusa thought of Taine, for his lectures bring to mind, at least in Mr. Gilmour's brief description of them, nothing so much as Taine's *History of English Literature*. Both are comprehensive workings-out, by a foreign writer for a foreign audience, of the characteristics of the English genius through the particularities of great—and on occasion merely typical—works of English literature. Like Taine, Lampedusa was concerned throughout his criticism with matters of biography and history and, according to Mr. Gilmour, "was fond of drawing attention to particular themes which he traced down through the centuries":

> The appeal of the sea, [for example,] which had fascinated poets as different as Raleigh, Coleridge and Kipling, could be traced back to

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> Old English poems such as 'The Wanderer'. Compassion for the 'underdog', which Lampedusa thought was a 'sporting' rather than a Christian attitude, could be found in the same period, and so could an interest in ruins. In 'The Ruin', a short poem which may be a lament for the sack of Bath, could be found the seed of that romantic interest which later populated so many English parks with follies.

Lampedusa also traced the effect on writers of England's cultural institutions, not least among them the public-school system. "Even more than forming men of culture," wrote Lampedusa, "[these schools] aim to form men of character. Separation from the family and a life with contemporaries eradicates that type of 'momma's boy' so perniciously frequent the more one travels to the south [of Europe]; compulsory sports in the open air in any kind of weather prevent timidity and physical fear and train one for rapid decisions and teamwork . . ." Of this Mr. Gilmour comments: "It is surprising to find Lampedusa praising a system of which he had no direct experience and in which he would not have prospered." But Lampedusa's point in sketching his ideal Etonian was to criticize all that his sheltered upbringing did not allow him to become, just as his point in teaching Conrad was to offer his students "an antidote to the unbearable stagnation of Palermitan life."

One of his students, Francesco Orlando, then a student of law at Palermo University, has published a memoir of his studies with Lampedusa. He remembers him as an excellent teacher, patient with his students' ignorance and "generous and kind beyond all description," lending freely from his library and even giving away books when a pupil showed a special interest. "He was undoubtedly happy to have broken his intellectual isolation," writes Orlando, "to be able to talk so much about literature, to get to know young people and transmit something to them." But toward the end of the course on English literature, a change came over Lampedusa, a change that grew more pronounced throughout the abbreviated course on French literature that followed. It is not that the quality of the lessons diminished—Orlando remembers Lampedusa at his summit as explicator of Eliot, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé—but that Lampedusa became "more reserved, less patient, prouder," and stingier with his time outside of class. At the time, Orlando was confused and pained by this, but in retrospect he realized the reason behind it: through preparing his lectures Lampedusa had discovered his calling as a writer, and now, more than anything else, he was eager to devote his best energies to composing a novel.

According to Licy, Lampedusa had been turning over ideas for a book for more than twenty years, and may well have begun a draft of it before World War II, though no pages of it survive. What had kept him from writing were two "Sicilian" self-attributes which he loathed—namely, inertia and diffidence. What now shocked him into action was not only his success with his lectures but something even less expected: the literary success of his cousin and long-time intellectual companion, Lucio Piccolo. In the spring of 1954, Piccolo, a genuinely talented poet, sent his recently self-published *Canti Barocchi* to Eugenio Montale, with a cover letter ghost-written by Lampedusa. The timing was fortunate, for Montale had just been asked to take part in a literary conference at which he and other established figures of Italian letters would each introduce an unknown writer. Montale sponsored Piccolo, whom he would later call a "sedentary piper who can draw unheard-of melodies even from a broken reed," and who, to Lampedusa's bitter astonishment, became the sensation of the conference. As a result of this success, Piccolo's little book of *canti* was soon picked up by the prestigious Milanese firm of Mondadori. Lampedusa later wrote to a friend: "Being mathematically certain that I was no more foolish [than my cousin], I sat down at my desk and wrote a novel."

The book that was to become *The Leopard* did not come all of piece, in a fit of in-

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spiration, but haltingly, after many false starts. What today stands as the first chapter was the product of many months' writing and rewriting, and the rest of the chapters came later, scene by discrete scene, and in nothing like the sequence in which they were finally ordered. *The Leopard* has no plot, but it has a "situation," which is dramatized in a series of indelible vignettes —the situation of Don Fabrizio, the heirless, star-gazing Prince of Salina, "watching the ruin of his own class and his own inheritance without ever making, still less wanting to make, any move towards saving it." The novel opens in Palermo, 1860, at the moment of its occupation by Garibaldi's Redshirts, who will soon win Sicily from the Bourbons and bring it into a newly unified, Piedmont-controlled Italy. Fabrizio's beloved, spirited, and penniless nephew Tancredi—himself, to the Prince's ambivalence, a hero among the Redshirts—would like to marry Fabrizio's pretty and passive daughter Concetta, but the Prince thinks the match not a good one for Tancredi. The world of the Salinas, like the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, is passing, or already past; Tancredi—whom Fabrizio fancies "the standard-bearer of a counter-attack which the nobility, under new trappings, could launch against the new social State"—must marry Angelica, the daughter of the Snopesish Mayor, a vibrant young woman who could bring him not only a considerable dowry but, through her grasping land-dealing father, political opportunity under the Piedmontese.

What gives the book its remarkable inner unity is not the story line—to which, as Montale pointed out, many more scenes could be added and certain others taken away—but rather the sensual, nostalgic controlling consciousness of Don Fabrizio. The old Prince silently mourns the end of his line, his Sicily, and, finally, his very life. When death at last comes for him, his thoughts are of these things as given form by his palace, Donnafugata, "the sense of tradition and the perennial expressed in stone and water, time congealed":

> He thought of his own observatory, of the telescopes now destined to years of dust; . . . of the paintings of his estates, of the monkeys on the hangings, of the big brass bed on which his dear [wife] Stella had died; of all those things which seemed to him humble, however precious, of artfully twisted metalwork, of fabrics and silken tapestries dyed with colors derived from earth and plant juices, which had been kept alive by him, and which shortly would be plunged, through no fault of their own, into a limbo of abandon and oblivion. . . . The significance of a noble family lies entirely in its traditions, that is in its vital memories; and he was the last to have any unusual memories, anything different from other families' . . . He had said that the Salinas would always remain the Salinas. He had been wrong. The last Salina was himself. That fellow Garibaldi . . . had won after all.

Fabrizio is indeed a portrait of Lampedusa's great-grandfather, Prince Giulio, in his astronomy, his sportsmanship, and his political situation. But, more than that, Fabrizio is, though Licy strenuously denied it, a fictional self-portrait—or, more precisely, the author's alter ego, the prince that Lampedusa would have liked to be. "Lampedusa," writes Mr. Gilmour, "did not have Salina's arrogant confidence, his overt sensuality, his authority over others: the author's own personality, largely moulded by his mother . . . made him a very different person. Lampedusa shared the Leopard's ideas and reactions, had many of the inner thoughts and feelings, but his behavior was that of a milder animal."

The figure of Tancredi, too, is a conflation of the historical and the personal. Prince Giulio did have a nephew among the Garibaldini, Corrado Valguarnera di Niscemi. But Tancredi, wrote Lampedusa, is, "so far as appearance and habits are concerned, a portrait of Giò"—that is, Gioacchino Lanza, Lampedusa's dearest pupil and, as of 1956, his son by adoption. Young Lanza was the great joy of Lampedusa's declining years, and in many ways another alter ego, exactly like the prince in his merits and defects: "He

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is sarcastic and indolent," Lampedusa wrote to a friend, "has a vivid curiosity for intellectual matters, is full of spirit, has much superficial malice and a good deal of fundamental kindness. Besides, more than with me, one can see a mile off that he is a 'gentleman'. In short, my wife and I are mad about him."

Lampedusa died, at the age of sixty, on July 23, 1957. A week earlier, he had received word from the Sicilian novelist Elio Vittorini, acting as consultant to the firm of Mondadori, that he could not recommend *The Leopard* for publication. According to this leading Neorealist, Lampedusa's book was "rather old-fashioned," not to mention "essayish" and "unbalanced," a verdict that upset the ailing novelist visibly. He knew he had no time to revise his work further, and no inclination to turn it into Vittorini's sort of commodity. He instructed his family to pursue publication after his death, but forbade them to publish at their own expense.

It was less than a year later that a typescript found its way to Giorgio Bassani, author of *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* and an editor of fiction for Feltrinelli. He published the book, with his own enthusiastic preface, in November 1958; by the end of the following year it had taken the Strega Prize, Italy's most prestigious award for fiction, and had gone through some fifty printings. It was already well on its way to becoming what it is today—the best-selling, most widely translated novel to have come out of Italy in this century.

The initial Italian reviews of *The Leopard* were remarkable for their warmth. Montale wrote one of the earliest, in which he called the book "almost perfect in form" and "the work of a mature and modern artist." Then, with the huge sales, came the predictable backlash. Lampedusa's critics, according to Mr. Gilmour, fell into four categories: "Sicilian apologists who were outraged" by his study of the island's "stagnation"; "fervent Catholics who disliked his pessimism"; "Marxists who attacked his view of history and apparent denial of progress"; and, most vocal of all, "the literary Left which thought novels ought to be avant-garde and 'committed'." That the Strega should go to a dead aristocrat who wrote historical fiction in standard-Italian diction was too much for some advanced novelists to bear: "For the last thirty years," complained Vasco Pratolini, "we have strained to advance our literature. Lampedusa has set us back sixty years."

Of course no one was more stultified by the book's success than Elio Vittorini. His well-publicized rejection of the novel had made him an intellectual laughingstock and called into question the successes of the whole Neorealist movement. An even greater blow to the Italian Left was landed by the French Marxist Louis Aragon. It was ridiculous, he said, for Alberto Moravia, Vittorini, and others to characterize *The Leopard* as a "right-wing book." Aragon correctly saw that it was a "merciless" criticism of the ultimate ineffectuality of Lampedusa's own class and that, far from being old-fashioned, the book owed an immense debt to such modern writers as Proust and Joyce. No, even for the *engagé* Aragon, *The Leopard* was a masterpiece, "one of the great novels of all time, and perhaps . . . the only Italian novel."

But Lampedusa is not read today because he conveniently serves the ideology of one or another political group. He is read, and reread, for the reason all great writers are read: the superb artistry with which he renders human experience. At the beginning of his memoirs, Lampedusa finds occasion to praise those of Stendhal, which he judges "a remarkable attempt to sweep away accumulated memories and reach the essence. And what lucidity of style! What a mass of reflections, the more precious for being common to all men!" And so posterity has come to judge *The Leopard*, that most mellow of twentieth-century novels, a valediction to the world by one who dearly loved it.

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The big top and beyond: Calder at the Whitney

by Karen Wilkin

Alexander Calder (1898-1976) is the Aaron Copland of the art world. Like Copland's, Calder's work is a baffling combination of rousing all-Americanness and predictable pastiche, of genuine invention and self-indulgent repetition, of unarguable significance and mind-numbing triviality. At their best, both Copland and Calder can be exhilarating; at worst, relentlessly cheerful. There's a reason why there are so many Calders in public places.

The mobile, that loose-limbed version of sculpture synonymous with the name Calder, is a real achievement, an authentically new addition to the language of sculpture made at a time when modernist construction was still inventing itself. (You can't blame the artist for all those school projects and gift-shop rip-offs.) The mobile is a highly original solution to a problem that has challenged sculptors ever since the words "sculpture" and "statue" ceased to be interchangeable. As long as statues were figurative, the issue of how parts related to one another, visually and structurally, was more or less solved. For figurative sculptors, the logic of the human body dictates both where parts are placed and how they support one another. Abstract sculptors, especially those like Calder and his colleagues who make open, essentially linear constructions, are neither guided nor constrained by the familiar structure of human anatomy, so composition and support demand equal application of inventiveness. David Smith's solution was to make the base part of the sculpture—that is, to integrate support and supported. Anthony Caro spread his early works at our feet, and then, as he moved his constructions away from the ground plane, deliberately confused supports with purely visual elements, so that what held up what simply became irrelevant. Calder hauled his sculptures into the air, hanging shapes in mid-air, more or less wherever he wanted them. In theory and to an extent in practice, this gave Calder unprecedented freedom of composition. What was more radical still, his method allowed him to attach elements loosely to one another, to rig them with twists and loops of wire, instead of bolting or welding them into a rigid structure; because of this, Calder permitted real movement to become a factor in what had been an art of fixed relationships. Whatever one thinks of the results, it was a hell of an idea. The chief reason that we pay any attention to Calder's works on paper and his so-called "stabiles" is, I suspect, because of the sheer ingenuity of his mobiles.

There is something of the amateur inventor about Calder, something a little self-conscious and *deliberately* playful about his work, whether three-dimensional or two-dimensional. He treads a fine line between exuberant charm and kitsch in those oh-so-witty transformations of found objects into art or utensils. But whatever one's reservations or ambivalences, Calder must be taken

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seriously. Like any deeply engaged artist, he deserves to be judged by his best work, and you would expect to be able to do just that at an exhibition called "Celebrating Calder." You would expect the Whitney Museum's current exhibition, described as an homage to "one of the most innovative sculptors of the twentieth century, as well as one of America's best-loved artists," to make the strongest possible case for its subject, but, curiously, it does not.[1] The show is a reasonably comprehensive retrospective that includes sculptures, paintings, drawings, prints, and jewelry from Calder's entire career, along with the celebrated Circus and the 1961 film of the artist performing with his wire-and-cloth troupe. Yet the selection, largely from the Whitney's own holdings —extensive but not definitive—has remarkably few highpoints. There's an unfortunate air of expediency about the show, as though it had been assembled from what was most readily available rather than what would represent the artist most powerfully. And while Calder admittedly often had more success with human-scale works than gigantic ones, the exhibition appears to have been chosen with portability in mind, which may or may not have been dictated by a planned tour to London and Valencia. Calder, whatever one thinks of him, deserves better.

The tone of the exhibition was set at the press preview. I signed in and asked for a catalogue. "There isn't one," said the young woman behind the desk, "but there's lots of information on the text panels and it's all in the press kit." Then she handed me the usual folder of press releases and fact sheets and—apparently in lieu of a catalogue—a box of good old animal crackers. In case I missed the connection with Calder's Circus, the wall panels told me that "animals were among Calder's favorite subjects." (Don't get me wrong. I've liked animal crackers *and* their box since I was about six and I was happy to have them.) The exhibition was also used to inaugurate something called "Family Day": free admission for kids under twelve, make-your-own-mobile workshops, clowns, balloons, a children's book launch, and tours designed for "family viewing of the work of one of America's most beloved artists, who retained his child-like, fun-loving spirit all his life."

I should say at once that despite this insistence on Calder as a benevolent Santa Claus figure, the show does document his evolution as an artist rather well. An early painting, *Fireman's Dinner for Brancusi* (1926, Whitney Museum), establishes the artist's "child-like, fun-loving spirit"; he depicts himself climbing on a table in a crowded room slightly reminiscent of the packed interiors of Florine Stettheimer. (It's difficult to judge from only one canvas of the period, but it's probably a good thing that Calder began to make sculpture.) A selection of some of his earliest efforts, the twisted-wire figures and sheet-metal animals made in the late Twenties, when the young artist began to travel between New York, Paris, and Berlin, are the first indications of what Calder would become. The less successful of these risk being terminally cute, but others are fascinating for the amount of telling anecdotal detail they pack into a single strand of wire or an intricately folded sheet of brass. Only a complete curmudgeon could resist the initial throw-away charm of these pieces, but the charm runs out fairly quickly. The wire and sheet-metal constructions seem to have little to do with sculptural notions—little, even, to do with ideas about drawing—other than making a single gesture do multiple duty. Instead, they have everything to do with clever depiction. The few early carved pieces in the show reinforce this impression, particularly an oddly un-plastic *Double Cat* (1930, Whitney Museum) that compresses two pre-Columbian-type felines on opposite sides of a slab of wood more than four feet long and five inches thick. It's amusing at first viewing, especially for us un-

1 "Celebrating Calder" opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, on November 14, 1991, and remains on view through February 2. It will travel to the Royal Academy of Arts, London (March 12-June 7), and the Ivam Centre Julio González, Valencia, Spain (September 12-November 8).

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reconstructed cat lovers, but it fails to transcend ingeniousness and engage us as sculptural form.

Seeing these pieces made me remember one of Stuart Davis's letters home, written during his year in Paris in the late Twenties. In January 1929 he wrote, "Tonight we are going to the opening of Sandy Calder's exhibit on the rue de Boëtie (son of Sterling Calder). Nobody is much interested in his work but it is an excuse for a lot of people to bump into each other." The reference to Calder's academic-sculptor father must have been included for the benefit of Davis's academic-sculptor mother. (Davis's own circle in Paris—the "nobody much interested" in Calder's work—included his old friend Elliot Paul, a founder of the avant-garde magazine *transition* and an intimate of Gertrude Stein's.)

The performers and the beasts in Calder's Circus are more straightforward than the wire sculptures. They are, quite simply, what they are—wonderful toys, some of which do delightful things in that film we've all seen in the Whitney's lobby, next to the case where the Circus is housed. In the current installation, the Circus and the film are set in the context of Calder's other works of the period, including a group of charming (there's that word again) circus drawings of the early 1930s whose tense continuous contours echo the squiggles and loops of the wire constructions. The film of the Circus makes sense of the tatterdemalion objects in the case. In action, the bucking bronco, the racing chariots, the drivers who snap their whips, the flying aerialists, the dogs that run on three-legged wheels have a paradoxically elegant Rube Goldberg quality that is irresistible; the "outline" weight-lifter, with his leopardskin costume and uncannily life-like movements, a modernist version of an eighteenth-century automaton, is always a treat. It's easy to see why Calder would experiment with works that moved, when he stopped adding to the Circus and began to make "serious" sculpture. Everything in the Circus depends on some sort of movement, whether the spring-loaded knife thrower, the string-operated trapeze artists, or the wind-up cooch dancer with the offset gear that pops her hip.

Stuart Davis's comments notwithstanding, Calder's performances with his Circus amused his friends and brought him into contact with many of the avant-garde artists resident in Paris in the Twenties and Thirties, including Jean Arp, Marcel Duchamp, Frederick Kiesler, Fernand Léger, Joan Miró, and Piet Mondrian. This constituted his real education as an artist, radically different from anything he had been exposed to by his family of traditional sculptors, or by his teachers during a few years of sporadic study in New York. As a result of his encounters with modernism, notably with Surrealism and Dada, Calder changed his focus. As he later recollected, a visit to Mondrian's studio thrust the notion of geometric abstraction forcibly at him and opened up wholly new possibilities of structure and color. (According to the wall text: "In 1930, after several years of making humorous wire figures, Calder decided to become a serious artist rather than a performer or entertainer.")

The exhibition is particularly rich in works made during the years when Calder was feeling his way as a "serious artist." It's simple to identify the artists whose work interested him at the time, since he unabashedly appropriated (the fashionable word is accurate, for once) the characteristic geometric and biomorphic forms he saw in the work of the vanguard artists he had gotten to know and began finding ways of setting them in motion. At first, he experimented with concealed motors, but, soon after, he devised his signature means of activating hanging forms through a combination of engineering, air currents, and chance. It was the way these works were assembled and how they functioned that was original, not their forms or imagery. Calder's discs and comma shapes, his occasional floral improvisation, his frequent fish images all have antecedents in the European artists who surrounded him. (This remained true

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throughout Calder's career.) We recognize immediately Arp-shapes, Miró-forms, Matisse-cutouts, and the like. A 1947 mobile of painted wood, string, and metal, *Sea Scape* (Whitney Museum), looks like an exploded Paul Klee still life.

Derivative or not, Calder's mobiles must have been extraordinarily fresh when they were first seen. Modernist construction was still in its infancy in the early 1930s and these disembodied constellations of flattened shapes must have seemed very surprising. Picasso and González had been making drawing-like metal sculpture only since about 1927 and their abstracted heads and figures were still relatively self-contained objects that enclosed space. Calder's constructions were open-handed scatterings of flat forms connected only by long, limber wires. But the most striking thing about these sculptures was their mutability. Chance relationships, random juxtapositions of form created by currents of air, had as much importance as the artist's intention. Giacometti hinted at this in his seminal *Woman with her Throat Cut* (1932, Museum of Modern Art), when he attached a long, pointed form to a skeletal "body" in a way that allowed it to swivel, but Calder apparently allowed *every* element in his works to find its own position in space. I say "apparently" because it is clear that the mobiles are not randomly arranged but delicately and subtly engineered, according to the dictates of particular weights, shapes, and sequences. But though the primary composition is entirely a reflection of the artist's will, that initial composition, that first sequence of forms, is, in ideal circumstances, subject to constant change.

In the airless Whitney, the mobiles were strangely inert. The smallest, most fragile, jewelry-like constructions were locked safely away in glass cases, while the larger pieces hung motionless. A few spectators furtively puffed at the closest discs and were rewarded by slight shifts, while two early motorized works performed valiantly. The stillness made even the most felicitous of the mobiles seem a little precious, but in the best, the ingeniousness, the cleverness that turns empty coffee cans into flying monsters, cuts starfish out of soup-can lids, and cantilevers them all off flexible rods, also subsumes them to a new whole. In Calder's most convincing works, we don't think about how he got a burst of discs and ovals to stay together, or how he figured out connections and sequences that would permit movement; we simply enjoy their slow progress through space. When connections and engineering concerns become overwhelming—as they frequently do in the larger pieces—the sculptures suffer. Such a large proportion of each sculpture is there for what can only be called practical reasons, as opposed to aesthetic ones—the rods, the loops, the reinforcing bars that thread through each disc—that large scale tends to make these elements dominant. This is not to deny that a sense of having been cobbled together is part of the appeal of Calder's best works. There's a ramshackle, vernacular feel to them, a sense of the structure's having been improvised to do a particular job that can be quite engaging. It's part of Calder's persistent Americanness, despite his years in France.

The late John Kouwenhoven's books about what makes American culture distinct deal indirectly with this aspect of Calder's work. I think it is in *The Beer Can by the Highway* that Kouwenhoven writes about the difference between the locomotives exhibited by the British and the Americans at nineteenth-century expositions. British engines were meticulously crafted, tightly constructed, and beautifully finished, while their American counterparts were loose-jointed, rawboned machines that flexed and wriggled as they steamed along. It wasn't due to poor craftsmanship on the Americans' part. Tight British-style locomotives would have shaken themselves to pieces on the irregular, rapidly laid tracks that newly spanned the immense North American continent. They needed the level, carefully graded tracks that had tied Britain together for decades. American locomotives were more accommodating and adaptable, if less elegant. Calder's best works have a similar rough-hewn quality, a sense of impermanence, of having been

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knocked together for the occasion. This may even account for his acceptance in Europe by sophisticated artists; they probably enjoyed the way Calder and his work fulfilled their notions of Americanness: the man's execrable French accent, his woodsman's shirts, his love of tinkering; the sculpture's lack of traditional finish, its homespun look, its zaniness.

Interestingly, despite the reputation of the mobiles, some of the strongest of the early works in "Celebrating Calder" are pieces that don't move. *Little Ball with Counterweight* (*c.* 1931, Mr. and Mrs. Leonard J. Horwich, promised gift to the Whitney Museum), suggests instability through the eccentric placement of a ball on a spindly table. An arc of wire diagrams a possible, if improbable, trajectory, should the ball roll off its perch. The evident fragility of the table, its narrowness and attenuated height, add to the impression of impending movement. *Constellation with Quadrilateral* (1943, Whitney Museum) is a wonderful procession of carved wooden forms, strung together with rigid wire. How things are attached or supported is not an issue; the connecting wire acts as crisp drawing, a counterpoint to the play of multicolored forms—a hollow square, an hourglass, a swelling oval, and the like—familiar to us from Arp and Miró's work, but convincing as "Calder-shapes" in this context. *Snake on a Post* (1944, Whitney Museum), a sort of inverted bronze funnel supporting a movable swirl of bronze "snake," seems remarkably current and, at the same time, reminds us of David Smith's cranky constructions of the 1940s, similarly elevated, like monstrances, on funnel shapes that bear witness to where bronze was poured into a mold during casting.

A comparison between Smith and Calder is inevitable. Smith was younger, of course, and while he was deeply indebted to the European moderns, he had none of Calder's first-hand experience of French vanguard art. Yet the two American sculptors shared a conception of the artist as artificer and artisan in one: someone who could transform the most ordinary materials and the most workaday techniques by placing them in new surroundings or divorcing them from normal function. They were on good enough terms in the 1940s for Calder to invite himself to Smith's house at Bolton Landing, in upstate New York, for a ski weekend (there was a problem finding boots big enough) but Smith, at least, seems not to have been very interested in Calder's work. It's not surprising. The emotional ambition, the expressive range of the two sculptors' work is totally dissimilar. The naked ferocity of Smith's sculptures puts them at the opposite end of the psychological spectrum from Calder's high jinks.

There are profound formal differences between the two artists, as well. Smith's sculpture, for all its dependence on intuition and its avoidance of preconception, depends a great deal on nuances of placement, subtle nudges out of true, delicate articulations into space. (This quality is invisible in photographs, which generally make Smith's pieces look silhouette-like and flat.) The idea of leaving complex spatial relationships even partly to chance, as in Calder's mobiles, would be anathema to Smith. Yet Calder's work depends no less than Smith's on evidence of the presence of the hand, not so much in terms of placement as in facture. We have to be able to believe that the hanging discs and commas were snipped out of a sheet of metal, that the connecting loops and rods were bent by hand—whether this was the case or not. Again, scale is the crucial issue. When Calder's mobiles get too large, they become anonymous and manufactured-looking, like any other large industrial object. They lose the wit that pervades the best of his mid-size pieces. Compare the scaleless, flavorless monster that hovers over the East Wing of the National Gallery with the sinuous lobstertrap fantasy that for years was the most conspicuous feature of the old Museum of Modern Art's staircase.

Issues of scale, of the relationship of part to part and of edge to plane, are what ultimately make Calder's late stabiles so problematic. No matter what their size, they

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are always made of uniform plates of steel, reinforced with uniform fins, so that no matter how enormous they are in fact, they seem papery, translated directly from a lightweight model, without any absolute scale of their own. Unlike the best of the mobiles, which celebrate their being handwrought, the stabiles seem to ignore the history of their own making, ignore the characteristics of their materials except in the most general way. Sometimes these streamlined, cutout behemoths can be effective. The enormous prehistoric beast *Theodelapo*, built for that legendary outdoor sculpture exhibition at the Spoleto Festival (1962), is a wonderful addition to an otherwise non-descript piazza in front of the railroad station in the lower town. Its relative thinness plays off of the surrounding wall of chunky buildings, seemingly not much higher than the sculpture. The old Fiat Cinquencentos could whiz under *Theodelapo*'s arches, making it seem like a real monument, a casual parody of the gates that pierce the protecting walls of Umbrian hill towns. The domestic-size stabiles in "Celebrating Calder" had the benefit of no such context and as a result, they simply looked like maquettes for larger works, with no perceptible reason for being the size they were. Their tripod stances seemed predictable, their structure determined long before, rather than having been discovered or invented in the course of making the piece.

Probably the best works in the show, the few that gave any inkling of how much fun a good Calder can be, were a pair of mobiles, one a froth of delicate white shapes, *Roxbury Flurry* (*c.* 1948), and the other a vivid, classic arc of blunt boomerangs on stalks, *Big Red* (1959), both in the collection of the Whitney. In these two pieces a great deal of what can make Calder appealing came across, despite both *Roxbury Flurry* and *Big Red*'s being virtually generic mobiles. For all their familiarity, they looked particularly lively and spontaneous in the context of the show.

The Whitney may have been right to hand out animal crackers (childhood nostalgia apart, that is) since some of the freshest works in "Celebrating Calder" were a set of illustrations for Aesop's fables. Here Calder seemed particularly relaxed, concerned perhaps with amusing himself rather than with making "serious art." The edition of Aesop and a portfolio of zingy color etchings, *Fêtes* (1971, Whitney Museum), with a text by the poet Jacques Prévert, criticized a group of Calder's slap-dash gouaches. In comparison to the Aesop drawings' quirky animals and the color etchings' dazzling intensities, the familiar spirals, stars, and stripes, the relentless red, blue, and yellow primaries of the gouaches seemed like unavoidable givens, rather like the fixed colors and patterns of flags. It's worth going uptown a little to the Stuart Davis retrospective at the Metropolitan to see what Davis did with a similarly limited palette, in the last decade or so of his life; red, green, orange-yellow, and black seem newly minted each time he used them.

A show like "Celebrating Calder" raises many questions, most of them not wholly aesthetic. Why, for example, is Calder so much better known and so much better served by the museums than David Smith, an immeasurably greater sculptor? The Whitney has fewer Smiths in its collection than it does Calders, but they include some of the artist's most powerful works. Between its own holdings, the works on long-term loan, and some selective borrowing, the Whitney could easily mount a Smith show that would make clear his claim to the title of Best American Sculptor. There hasn't been a Smith sculpture retrospective of any ambition in New York since the 1960s. Of course, Smith, unlike Calder, could never be described as "one of America's best-loved artists" and his tough, confrontational sculptures—introspective, slightly threatening, sexy—are hardly the stuff that provokes a Family Day. Still, it makes you wonder.

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Poems
by Leslie Norris & John Matthias

A carol for my wife

It is a winter afternoon, the hills
are cold. All day starved birds
have eaten of our bread, and now
go freezing through the night.

It is a sullen sky waits for
last light to stutter out.
The one cloud above us
has left no room for stars,

not even the holy star
children are told of.
But for me it is not the death
of any year, nor hint of death

of man or god that holds me.
It is for me as if the world
smiles at us, saying, here,
take it, as if the sun were alight,

as if someone above weather were giving us
another lifetime, whole, together.

—Leslie Norris

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After years away

I. My bed, my father's bell

First my bed, then his, now mine again—
just for a week.

He died in it, my father, where for years
I'd lie beside my pretty love,

alive and indiscreet.
He moved in here so she, my mother,

might sleep undisturbed while he gazed darkly
all night long into the dark.

In need, he'd ring a small brass bell
molded in the shape

of a hoop-skirted lady
sweeping with a broom and looking grim.

I see it now,
lying sideways on a row of books.

He'd ring it and she'd come to him.

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II. My father's bell, my grandfather's books

The books are remnants of a city gardener's
life: the works of Emerson,

a Tennyson collected, *Paradise Lost.*
He's written in his Milton

1650
1608

42 years. And on the title page:
Begun in January, 1893, and never finished.

In another hand: *Happy new year to you, 1892.*
He's figured that J.M. was 42 in 1650

when he wrote his answer to Salmasius
and lost his sight.

Defensio pro Populo Anglicano.
At the Presbyterian funeral a cousin

asked: *are you religious?* and I said
in callow family disaffection:

Gnostic. Bogomil. Albigensian for heaven's sake.
On the *Ex Libris* plate:

Poetry. This book will not be loaned.
And underneath: *couldn't dig this month.*

Ground as cold as hell.
I replace the book. I pick up the bell.

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III. My mother's broom, my father's bell

My mother stashed these books in here
for me to find. My father

would have seen them, reaching for his bell,
but they were not for him.

She left them here, her father's only legacy,
as she began to sweep.

She swept the hearth, the porch and drive,
she even swept the street.

(She swept my father once entirely
off his feet.)

While he lay dying & while I sat reading books,
she swept his mortal breath away,

I think.
When she heard the ringing here . . .

And then swept circles round & round the bier
as I said *Gnostic, Bogomil.*

Although the ground was cold as hell
they dug the grave & dug it deep.

Sweet sleep. Sweep sweep.
There's no one here to listen or to care,

and so I ring the bell—
creating great commotion *there.*

—*John Matthias*

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Art

Amateurs & others

by Jed Perl

The most talked-about gallery show this past September consisted of paintings by artists whom nobody had ever heard of. "Thrift Store Paintings," a gathering of nearly two hundred pictures that artist Jim Shaw gleaned from resale shops across America as well as from other collectors, pulled in big crowds at Metro Pictures, and is now scheduled to be seen in Chicago, Los Angeles, and a number of European cities. Shaw's *My Mirage* installation, an anthology of all the creepy-cartoony imagery that's marketed to adolescents in the malls and discount stores of Middle America, was in the Whitney Biennial last spring. "Thrift Store Paintings" is another sort of anthology. It highlights two very different kinds of taste: the taste of the generally anonymous artists who painted these pictures and could hardly have imagined that their work would be exhibited in one of New York's power galleries, and the taste of the New York gallery-goers who are generally indifferent to anything but the big-name artists and yet thought this was an important show. The artists and the audience were, obviously, worlds apart; Jim Shaw's achievement was to have brought these worlds into collision.

The thrift-store paintings are, almost all of them, no more than a foot or two high and flatly, unemphatically painted. Obviously, subject matter is the thing that these amateur artists care about the most, and the interest of the show was, for the most part, in the profusion of subjects. There were paintings of a baby golf player in diaper and cap, the Guggenheim Museum, robots invading Earth, a blonde in a cocktail dress posed against the backdrop of a modernist city, a squaw in a sexy bikini, two hands embracing a woman's breast, a barechested guy with a cross hovering in the sky above him, a roll of toilet paper. There was lots of sub-Dali Surrealism and some psychedelic stuff, including one painting that incorporated James Dean's name. While there was the occasional painting that showed some pictorial flair—a startlingly odd sense of proportion or scale, a way of modeling forms so softly as to make them look weirdly poetic—most of the paint handling was dutiful at best. The artists didn't seem able to do much more than get the canvas (or canvas board) covered.

When one looks at all this deadpan work, one can hardly begin to imagine what was on the artists' minds when they did it. It is in the nature of the naïve painter to always remain something of an enigma, and this goes even for the great naïf, such as Le Douanier Rousseau. André Malraux referred to Rousseau as having escaped "from the wheel of art history," and perhaps the enigmatic quality comes from these artists' being unschooled in history and tradition—we cannot know them in relation to other artists because they never knew themselves that way. In the case of most of the artists whose work is included in "Thrift Store Paintings," it is reasonable to assume that they didn't do

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more than a few paintings and had little idea of what they were up to, save for filling a few hours and indicating in some very general way what they would like a picture to contain. The artists were probably, many of them at least, perfectly in earnest when they did these pictures; yet their technique is insufficient to make their intentions clear.

The work in "Thrift Store Paintings" comes out of the wacko semiconsciousness of the culture, and so it fits neatly into Jim Shaw's vision of an America drenched in kitsch. Some friends of mine found the show disappointing or even offensive: disappointing because many of the paintings had nothing much to recommend them, offensive because the show presented trashy, amateur work as something deserving of attention. I understand where those friends are coming from but I don't exactly agree. While the work was generally undistinguished, I think that, taken as a whole, it had an authentic power. "Thrift Store Paintings" was a show about the allure of the inchoate. It was about the fantasies that swirl around in people's heads—and occasionally pop out in these peculiar forms. It suggested that part of the fascination of vernacular and popular expression has to do with its frequently muffled, unfinished nature. At "Thrift Store Paintings," one wasn't engaged with art as a total absorbing experience but with art as an experience that is enjoyable precisely because it is incomplete, provisional.

In the early years of this century it was the power of the primitive and naïve that attracted artists. The early moderns were overwhelmed by the flat-out completeness of African art and the paintings of Rousseau. European culture was felt to be on the verge of collapse, and primitive and naïve art suggested the shape of an emerging consciousness—it suggested revolutionary virtues. Now, nearly a century later, we are so used to hearing of revolutions, both spiritual and practical, that have failed or failed to fulfill their goals, that the underdogs and the outsiders who were expected to be the beneficiaries of these revolutions are more poignant than heroic—we suspect that they'll always be left outside. "Thrift Store Paintings" was a show full of failures and wannabes—its subject was the poetry of the underdog. And Jim Shaw even managed to find, amidst all the underdogs, one anonymous artist who, on the evidence of a series of eleven paintings commemorating some of America's first ladies, is an original. He singled out this series by hanging it at the front of the gallery.

I would have thought that this group of rather Art Deco-looking compositions dated from the 1930s, except that they include portraits of Lady Bird Johnson and Pat Nixon, so have to have been done much more recently than that. This anonymous artist uses clear, sharp colors, and knows how to set those clean hues against beautiful grays. These homages to first ladies are generally symmetrical, with the first lady —either full figure or a bust—presented a bit formally, like a trophy in the center of a shop window. The figures are surrounded by elaborate mazy patterns and borders made of, among other motifs, stars and diamonds and crosses. These decorative elements are like the bunting that used to be arranged around the speaker's platform at a political rally. The odd accoutrements—like a coffee service with faces on each piece of the set or a boat with billowing sails—may have some biographical connection to the first lady in question, but to the casual observer they're nothing more than the enigmatic icons that a cheerfully demented mind has arranged in obsessive-compulsive patterns. The first ladies singled out for commemoration include Dolly Todd Madison, Frances Folsom Cleveland, and Grace Goodhue Coolidge. All of them have similar faces, and it's tempting to imagine that these slightly toothy, unprepossessing faces (Shelley Duvall could play the roles) are in some way self-portraits of the artist. It's impossible, in any event, to imagine that the artist is not a woman—the kooky, stylized femininity recalls Florine Stettheimer's work. In the mind of this anonymous artist national life has become a dimension of a pri-

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vate fantasy life—she's the lady in the White House. The first-lady paintings are scenes from a demented Fourth of July pageant. These zany skits—like Busby Berkeley routines for one—would have delighted Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson with their blithely individualistic view of American history. They were the discovery of "Thrift Store Paintings," and a group show that includes a genuine discovery, anonymous or otherwise, is nothing to sneer at.

The photographer and video artist William Wegman has explained his turn toward drawing and painting in terms of a desire to set aside worries "about lighting or electronic feedback," in terms of a break from domestic subjects, in terms of a yen for adventure—for boats, sea, sun. The paintings that Wegman showed at Sperone Westwater over the winter as a warm-up for his retrospective at the Whitney, which opens this month, suggest playful abandon, and it's enjoyable to run one's eyes over these big, washy pictures and pick out the teeny-weeny sea creatures and tropical islands and birds and boats that Wegman has doodled here and there. In structure they're not particularly different from the paintings that Wegman showed at Holly Solomon in 1988, but Wegman's work has become even more easygoing, and especially in the biggest painting here, *Itinerary: Scenic Views*, I found myself entering into the obvious fun that the artist was having as he doodled his way across the canvas. As is the case with most of the Wegman canvases, this one is basically a Color Field painting. At almost ten by fourteen feet, it first strikes one as a mottled gray surface that shifts—beautifully, shimmeringly—to greener and bluer and more golden hues. Using a mix of oil and acrylic media, Wegman orchestrates a beguiling surface. And then he scatters it with crabs and lobsters, trees, huts, a lighthouse. He knows how to pace the little images. He turns one pour of paint into a surreal hand complete with fingers and fingernails.

Wegman seems to go into a trance when he works on a painting. He gets into the rhythm of a mottled, variegated surface, and the little effects are lyrical and surprising. This is deluxe doodling, and one gets caught up in it. I go into the paintings and I go around them. *Quest for Trouvère* is dark, rainswept. *Ars Nova M.S.* is all sunny golds. The canvases are amusing in their juxtaposition of big overall color and tiny illustrationy articulations. But the juxtaposition becomes, structurally speaking, a gimmick. Wegman is telling us that we are everywhere and nowhere in these watery weightless worlds of his. That works as a literary or psychological idea, but it doesn't work in pictorial terms. Even when I'm in front of one of the paintings, I can't encompass it with my eyes—everything is so evenly weighted or so idiosyncratically described, it's impossible to *feel* one thing in relation to another thing. The paintings don't add up. Like David Hockney, Wegman likes to suggest what painting could do rather than actually settle down and do it. I saw Wegman's show twice, and each time I felt charmed but not hooked. Wegman turns a field of color into a stream of consciousness and all his beguiling little doodles are washed away.

The Jeff Koons show at Sonnabend in December, which featured Koons and his wife, the Italian porn star and member of parliament Cicciolina, turning on to each other in many media, is militantly heterosexual. The militancy is a form of irony. The work is so cartoonish and the presentation—in photographs transferred to canvas, in sculpture that is crafted to Koons's specifications in glass, marble, and polychromed wood—is so absurdly exhibitionistic that the artist and his lady love become another product to put up on the shelf where Koons has already put his waterlogged basketballs and chrome-plated bunnies and porcelain Michael Jacksons. Turning heterosexuality into a camp joke is Koons's way of commenting on our overheated sexual politics. He wants to add to the heat, and that's exactly what he has done. That he has presented heterosexual sex with a kind of baroque stylization derived from the stage shows in the downtown

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clubs only adds new wrinkles to gender bending—Koons and Cicciolina are heteros parodying hetero sex. My sense is that downtown is a little uncomfortable with Koons these days. For the time being he's such a successful marketer of porn that he makes the NEA controversies about the funding of sexually explicit work feel like the neuroses of a bunch of socialist aesthetes. But Koons's show couldn't even claim to hold our serious attention if it were not for the seriousness of the debates over sexual expression in the arts, and so perhaps some have a sick feeling that Koons is a monster that they've helped to create.

Theoretically, the galleries are now prepared to show anything, no matter how sexually explicit or socially unconventional; yet several generations have come of age since the sexual revolution and the beginnings of the women's movement and Stonewall and still the visual arts haven't managed to tell us much that is new about how men and women relate, sexually or otherwise. Photography, with its immediate connection to the shadings of contemporary life, is probably more obviously up to the task than painting or sculpture. Homoerotic photography has certainly become the stuff of deluxe picture books and, through the Calvin Klein ads, Bruce Weber's brand of homoeroticism has become a popular style. Yet what men see when they look at men's bodies is hardly a new subject; so far as Western art is concerned, it's mainstream. The erotic vantage point that hasn't ever really been presented in art is the woman's; and so while a man's view of men's bodies is going to bring to mind the Greeks, Michelangelo's *ignudi*, Caravaggio's boys, a woman's view of men's or women's bodies could be the only new subject matter under the sun. There has been some work that has essayed these subjects in a very direct manner, but most of it, by Sylvia Sleigh and a few others, has been shaky at best. Indeed, what has been remarkable at this first moment in history when so many of the key artists are women artists, is how few of them have taken up these subjects. I don't think that the reason is that figurative art is a minority style, and I don't think that the reason is that women are afraid. No one knows more about sexual politics than women artists who've made something of themselves in an art world where machismo rages on. But a raised consciousness is by no means inconsistent with the idea that formalism equals freedom—which is what many of the women feel. The big news isn't that a woman artist can tell a male model to drop his pants, it's that tradition transcends gender.

Sara Rossberg, who showed her new paintings at Stiebel Modern in October, presents herself as a formalist. She gives her detailed realist paintings titles such as *Body over Magenta*, *Body over Green*. But the titles are somewhat disingenuous, for the interest in these rather stiff and overworked paintings has everything to do with the body in question, which that of a guy whom one gathers is the artist's boyfriend—he appears in all the paintings in her show. These paintings may be the first instances in which something like the thinking woman's hunk—the Sam Shepard type (though this guy doesn't look like Shepard)—appears in an art gallery. Rossberg brings to these pictures a concentration that, while it is overly literal and overly fixated on paint handling, isn't quite like anything else we've seen in recent art. The work isn't noteworthy as painting, but it does define a new subject.

In three paintings we see the boyfriend sitting on a bed. It looks as if he's in the process of getting undressed: he has on his pants and socks, but he's barechested. The pictures are all seventy-two inches high, and most of that space is dominated by the guy's torso. Rossberg concentrates on that torso, and the concentration is heartfelt: she's the female gazing. The guy doesn't look back. He's seen from the back, or else his head is bent, his eyes are averted. In several paintings he holds his hands above his head, as if to emphasize that he isn't doing anything useful. The tight framing of the images, which gives us the sense that the man is seated in a space in which he can't stand up, further underlines the figure's passivity.

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These are laboriously painted paintings, and you can't help thinking of the guy sitting there while she's painting him. (Although of course it's possible that she's working from drawings or photographs.) The bedroom, a partly open closet door, the guy's red socks and casual pants: these tie the images into a familiar domestic world, and the boyfriend seems perfectly comfortable here. He's letting his girlfriend take a long look at him, he's there for her—he's the new man.

Rossberg sets all this in front of us, and then she tricks it up and louses it up with her acrylic technique. She works her acrylic gels into a kind of relief, so that a shoulder or arm will be a quarter of an inch thicker than the part of the body that it overlaps. Maybe this is Rossberg's way of expressing the density and weight of form; but it's a clichéd way to describe physicality. When you get up close to the paintings, they're as icky as flocked wallpaper. Rossberg uses ridges and squiggles and dots of gel to render patterns and textures—a bedspread, the wallpaper. The result is to give these paintings a creepy cloisonné effect. This aggrandizes the subject matter in strange ways, turning the goodlooking boyfriend into a clichéd New Age icon. The rather sepulchral light and dark paneling at the Stiebel Modern gallery didn't help, either. It was as if the dealers were trying to turn these paintings, with their hot-stuff subject, into dull tony product. Rossberg's revved-up color makes her paintings look pompous; I wonder if she doesn't find her subject a little overexplicit and feel a need to formalize it. Whatever the reason, it's a shame to see a talented artist turning out pseudo stuff.

Katherine Anne Porter's beautiful 1950 essay "A Note on Pierre-Joseph Redouté" is little more than a thumbnail sketch of the life of the flower painter who lived and worked in France before and after the Revolution, yet it presents what is possibly the strongest case imaginable for flower painting, an art that (like gardening) divides the world into the true believers and the more-or-less hostile. To the hostile, Porter's essay probably falls into the category of grand dame performances—she's the *monstre sacre* as Southern hostess, taking a few minutes off from the literary wars to arrange the roses. What the essay is really about is the discipline of art, and the juxtaposition of the painter of roses with the turmoil of France from the 1780s to the 1820s sneaks up on the reader, so that by the end of Porter's brief six pages flower painting feels heroic. "On the very eve of the revolution," Porter writes, Redouté "was called before the royal family in the Temple, to watch the unfolding of a particularly ephemeral cactus bloom, and to paint it at its several stages." In the next sentence the Queen is put to death. Porter observes that "[i]t is astonishing how a world may turn over, and a whole society fall into ruin, and yet there is always a large population which survives, and hardly knows what has happened." Redouté does not not know; indeed after the Revolution he sinks into increasing poverty; but he goes on doing what is important to him. "On the day of his death he received a student for a lesson. The student brought him a lily, and he died holding it." There's a moral intensity to flower painting: this is what Porter is saying.

It's that moral intensity that leads certain artists, once they start painting flowers, to paint little else. Flowers are just about all that Rita Baragona paints; and while she hasn't lived through a revolution, she's been at it for decades, so can be said to have seen a lot of life passing by while she's been figuring out how to paint bouquets. Some of her bouquets include a view out a window, and she sometimes paints her flower garden, and an occasional self-portrait, but mostly it's just bouquets and flowering plants. The work has gotten better as she's gone along. In the paintings that she showed at the Bowery Gallery in November the dominant colors are violet and gray and yellow and pale green. The paintings are paler and yet brighter than heretofore. It's remarkable to be able to give pale colors such brilliance.

Baragona's paintings (which are mostly

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on paper and mostly small-scaled) are not concerned with composition in any ordinary sense. There's generally just a bunch of flowers front and center; even when Baragona paints a garden, the composition is drily symmetrical. In this show she is mostly painting one kind of flower per composition—and it's often a rather plain blossom, a geranium or impatiens or violet. Baragona does not render anything in great detail; there's very little drawing in the paintings, but she works her acrylic strokes in such a way that the flowers open up, expand. The movement and drama is in the orchestration of colors, and Baragona's combinations have never before been as compelling as they are here. She uses a few colors that are dramatically different in hue but are all pervaded by the same gently filtered light. She builds small, powerful structures without seeming to do very much at all. The results are miniaturized visions of paradise—a paradise of yellow-violet light.

I have only a few gripes. Sometimes Baragona gets caught up in her own virtuosity, and an effect—such as the twigs of forsythia seen through a glass vase—is rather slick. Sometimes she falls into the stylized silhouetting of objects, and isolates petals or leaves from one another with an edge of unpainted white paper—it's a lazy way to achieve coherence. I like it when Baragona paints on canvas rather than paper, but I wish she would use a smoother kind of canvas, because the tooth of the rather rough weave she employs gets in the way of her delicate watercolorish acrylic technique. These are the things that bothered me at the show. But mostly I was held by the intensity of Baragona's work. Baragona knows what she's doing. One painting is called, after Shakespeare, *Violets Dim*—and Baragona turns morning into afternoon light and summons up a silvery, intense-yet-dusky aura.

Peter Galassi, who has been a curator in the Museum of Modern Art's Department of Photography for a decade, has now, with the retirement of John Szarkowski, been named director. In his years at the museum Galassi has been known for his historical shows. In 1981, "Before Photography: Painting and the Invention of Photography" created a sensation with its thesis that the coming of photography was in some respects an outgrowth of the development of plein-air landscape painting. According to the mystical-formalist argument of Galassi's catalogue, the experience of working directly from nature pushed artists toward the invention of a new medium that had, technically speaking, been feasible for some time. In 1987, Galassi's "Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Early Work" shifted attention from the journalistic orientation of Cartier-Bresson's later images to what Galassi sees as the more Surrealist bent of the 1930s work. Given the historical tilt of many of his MOMA projects, Galassi may well have been feeling in recent seasons, when it was already widely assumed that he would be named Szarkowski's successor, that he needed to address contemporary photography in a major way. His new show —which went up only a couple of weeks after his appointment was announced in October—does exactly that. "Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort" (which was on view from October 26 to December 31) gathers together work by sixty-two photographers who take middle-class America as their subject; it's perhaps the Modern's biggest contemporary photography survey since Szarkowski did "Mirrors and Windows" in 1978, and although it makes no claims to being encyclopedic, it serves as an introduction to Galassi's view of the current scene.

The department that Galassi now heads opened a little more than fifty years ago. Back then it was utterly original for a museum to have a department devoted to photography; the inspiration came from the Bauhaus masters and the Russian Constructivists, who saw photography as an essential element in a modern artistic vision. By now the MOMA photography department has lost control of the revolution it pioneered; photography is so pervasive an element in art culture—and there are so many artists who don't regard themselves as photog-

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raphers but who use photographs—that a curator of photography must find all the interconnections overwhelming. Galassi's introduction to the catalogue of "Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort" is a graceful attempt to contextualize photography: he cites contemporary fiction writers such as Jane Smiley and Mary Gaitskill; he quotes John Updike on American fiction; he chides postmodern theory for claiming "that media culture has robbed experience of originality and authenticity" but then observes that "there was a point to be made"; he compares photographers to painters and sculptors, and brings in work by Joel Shapiro, Robert Gober, Mike Kelley, and Eric Fischl; he discusses the "files of advertising and stock-photo agencies" that Marvin Heiferman and Carole Kismaric used for the 1990 book about Fifties kitsch, *I'm So Happy*, and says that "As we recoil from the shallow fictions of material success and domestic bliss, we are invited to recognize that they are our own"; he ends by remarking that "Photography isn't perfect, but then life isn't either." Galassi is doing what must be done if the MOMA photography department is going to keep up; but, oh boy, Galassi's essay is so damn predictable, it has the air of an assignment done precisely according to specifications. I get to the end and I can almost see the big A+ in red.

I rather dreaded going to see Galassi's show, because I often find that photographers who set out to show us the truth about contemporary life end up rubbing our faces in our ugliness, our folly. I think it is the writer Janet Malcolm who commented that you can have a perfectly nice gathering of people and take a photograph of it, and then when you look at the photograph all you notice is the tangle of electrical wires under the table—the photograph captures nothing but that trivial mess. A lot of photographers use those ugly things that we don't actually notice when we're in a situation as a stand in for the truth. Pimples and cracks are given schlock allegorical significance, and we're supposed to believe that there's really something to this allegory, since the pimples and cracks were actually there. There's some of this stuff in Galassi's show, but there isn't as much of it as I'd expected; taken as a whole, the selection is straightforward and generous-hearted. Perhaps middle-class guilt is out of fashion—and so the photographers who twenty years ago would have been sneering at the manicured lawns and shiny dining room tables are now enjoying them. In any event, the show isn't a hate fest; the photographers can think of something to do other than show us how ugly everybody is. Nevertheless, a lot of the work included doesn't do much more than put the museum-goer in the position of the casual voyeur. This is interesting, but only up to a point. One observes the photographers' subjects, thinking that this person is better or worse looking, that this house is better or worse looking. There are all the usual themes of love and family, and being together and feeling apart, and being apart and wanting to be together, but mostly these photographers don't know how to shape the material.

There is one exception—a recent body of work by Nicholas Nixon. Nixon, who was born in 1947, is an artist whose work is familiar to visitors to the Museum of Modern Art. Galassi organized a show of his photographs there in 1988; and Nixon was included in "Mirrors and Windows." He is still best known, I think, for the series of photographs he has done, over time, of his wife and her three sisters. Each year he takes a shot of the four of them standing in a row, and I've always found these dry documents of their changing physiognomies and styles in dress deadly dull—like an Ingmar Bergman movie done as a film strip. In the series of photographs of his own children that was shown at Zabriskie in September 1990 and is now included in "Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort," Nixon takes a leap—a quantum leap. The subject is Nixon's children, Sam and Clementine. Sometimes their mother appears in a supporting role, but basically these photographs are about a children's world. Nixon has photographed his kids before, but only now, when they've

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turned from toddlers into kids, are their personalities so vivid that they're capable of bringing Nixon to life as an artist. Nixon takes the camera down to the kid's level, and he moves around a lot, so that we keep finding ourselves in the midst of the siblings' interactions. Nixon can't get enough of his children's faces—he obviously adores these kids; in most of the images we see those faces and then the scraps of room that appear between them, behind them. The camera is humanized; it feels mobile, intimate. The low close-up viewpoint reminds me of some of Vuillard's more eccentric vantage points—which he sometimes used when he did paintings of children—and then it occurs to me that Vuillard was a snapshot photographer, too. These Nixon photographs have the quickness and casualness of snapshots, and yet, since they're done with an 8 x 10-inch view camera, there's also a deliberateness and a slowness about them. The lighting is luminous, and the forms, mostly those children's heads, are big and round and graceful. The format, horizontal but squarish, adds to the sense of concentration—these images are about the rapt concentration that family members sometimes give to one another. You begin to love these kids the way Nixon loves them. The gaping mouths, the foot held in the hand—all the klutzy things kids do—are here, and they're wonderfully surprising, surprising like the forms in some of Picasso's paintings of kids. In one photograph Clementine has something in her mouth, and her cheek bulges out and she turns into a Picasso girl.

The photographs are from 1990, and they're the best news we've had in photography in a long time. These photographs are about the nonstop activity of childhood, and about how parents get caught up in it. The sense of elation in this work recalls Lartigue, the boy photographer. Nicholas Nixon is a baby boomer who reclaims some of his own boyishness when he plays around with his kids. The compositions are crowded yet fluid; the mood is light, zany, exhilarating.

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A celebrated age

by Creighton Gilbert

Columbus's journey was not an art event; its causes and characteristics belong to parts of experience that we classify elsewhere. To put it in academic terms, the Art History Department does not mention it in its explications of the art of its time—not, at any rate, in relation to European art or to that of most of the world. Its one best connection of that kind is with the origins of the Latin American art of the following colonial centuries. It is the History Department that must chiefly cope with Columbus, and in many of its subspecialties, ranging from the economic to the demographic, the technological, the political, and the military. For art history, the key event of 1492 is the death of Lorenzo the Magnificent.

If one decided to take note of Columbus's journey, as a journey, by means of a display of objects, the result would have the tone of a local historical museum. At one end there would be maps, a few papers, and portraits of the admiral and of Isabella, and at the other there would be potsherds, as artifacts of the people of the western side. Besides such authentic survivors from circa 1492, ship models and more maps could legitimately be used to flesh out the installation.

The grand exhibition in Washington called "Circa 1492" is not like that at all.[1] It has brought from all over the world, especially Europe, the Far East, and the Americas, a stunning series of works of art, many exceedingly famous. (Only one of the larger cultures of the time seems to have no place in it, the Slavic.) The European masterpieces here, previously known to most of us only through reproductions, begin with Hieronymus Bosch's triptych of the temptation of St. Anthony, and end with Dürer's watercolors of his Alpine journey. The sudden enhancement from picture books to reality is so pleasing, indeed enticing, that it drives out any question about what these works have to do with the journey. The question has by no means been evaded, however, by the organizers of the exhibition. In his foreword to the catalogue, J. Carter Brown, Director of the National Gallery of Art, points out that the title omits Columbus's name on purpose, that this is not about him but rather about his age. The works of art best allow us to grasp the lasting significance of that age.

In a further prefatory essay, the retired Librarian of Congress Daniel Boorstin makes a distinction between discovery, in which the latest continually supersedes its predecessors, and creation, which is forever, and tells us that the exhibition is predominantly about the latter. So the art of 1492, as creation, can still directly move us, yet part of the reason for showing it is to reveal the era

1 "Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration" opened at the National Gallery of Art on October 12, 1991, and will remain on view through January 12. A catalogue, edited by Jay A. Levenson, has been published by the National Gallery of Art/Yale University Press (671 pages, $59.95; $45 paper).

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that produced it. In this somewhat roundabout way the show does get back to the time of the journey, and with the added idea that the time was wonderful. This tone fits the exhibits better than it does the history.

In a third introductory essay, the organizer of the exhibition, Jay Levenson, writes that the period was one of "artistic excellence in so many parts of the globe" and that the exhibition is about that circumstance. He does, to be sure, make a historical point, about the heightening of awareness between world cultures that resulted from such voyages, of which Columbus's was among the earlier. Yet this heightening hardly came about rapidly enough to be reflected in the art shown here (such allusions from one culture to another as this art presents derive mostly from older interconnections, such as those along the silk route). Levenson then makes the somewhat conflicting point that the show wants to present each culture firmly on its own terms, not as it appeared to others. This approach, which removes the voyages from a role, seems to apply better to what we see.

It does seem that now and then the show turns from its main purpose, that of being a celebration of artistic creation, to become something very much else: a documentary report in which the objects serve to illustrate other kinds of history. The interplay and occasional tension between these motives is most obvious in the fascinating section produced by Martin Kemp, an art historian who has studied to great effect the involvement of Renaissance art with technology and science. Here we are offered a group of astrolabes, navigational instruments essential at the time. Though they are beautiful in form and construction, they clearly do shift the point away from art as creation. Nearby hangs a spectacular loan, the only surviving copy of the huge woodcut world map of 1507 by Waldseemüller, the first to use the term America. (For quite sound reasons it is there attached to Brazil.) This map is not an aesthetic object but an operational tool, yet in several ways it is fully in harmony with the exhibition's ambiance. One is its grand scale, another the effect it makes of a curatorial coup, of bringing to the public from a remote collection an object of rare significance. Other such coups appear in the Kemp section. Piero della Francesca's manual on perspective is shown in what is thought to be an autograph copy, open to an intricate and refined drawing; here also are the two existing drawings by Paolo Ucello that work out especially tricky problems in the geometry of perspective.

That kind of success in borrowing extends also to great objects that seem to have nothing to do with history but only with creation. The museum in Cracow loaned its portrait by Leonardo da Vinci, one of about ten paintings in the world agreed upon unanimously to be by him. Visiting art historians can only feel professional gratitude, since Cracow is hardly ever on their itineraries. The same applies to Lisbon, which has loaned not only the Bosch triptych, probably the premier masterpiece of painting in all of Portugal, but also, even more generously, a panel of the altarpiece by Nuño Gonçalves, the greatest painting by any Portuguese artist. The latter, to be sure, has some historical aptness, since in a corner, among other portraits, it includes the face of Prince Henry the Navigator. Even if he did not actually navigate much, he certainly has a firm place in the history of voyages.

The greatest object along these lines is one of the dozen or so drawings by Leonardo to be included in the show. This is his "Vitruvian Man," the image of a naked figure stretching his arms and legs in two ways, so that they exactly fit a circle in one case and a square in the other. Demonstrating, in the simplest but most intense of diagrams, the notion of direct harmonious correspondence between humanity and the rules of mathematics, it functions widely today as a sort of logo of the Renaissance, though the concept actually belongs to the Renaissance's other common pattern of adopting ancient classical notions. After seeing it in so many reproductions, including advertisements, even once on the side of a

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truck, it is a curiosity to find the real thing, a piece of paper usually hidden in the correct way in a box in a museum in Venice. This whole assemblage of great masterpieces from around the world—both in their origins and in their current ownership—recalls to the dizzied specialist the Musée Napoleon, which once aspired to do this permanently. Only in one case is there a clue of a failed attempt to borrow. Among the collection of perspective images on display are several examples of intarsia, the inlaid-wood technique that flourished only at this period. At the center of the gallery is an attractive and complex object, an octagonal table with a lectern on top, on loan from a church in the small Italian town of Gubbio. The catalogue, in a rare procedure, calls it an inferior example of its art, saying others have more geometric sophistication, and that it is not by the artist long supposed to have made it because his work is finer. Among the works it cites for comparison is the paneled room produced for the duke's palace in the same town of Gubbio, which one would in any case recall. It is one of two such paneled rooms in the world from this early phase of intarsia, and in the 1940s was beautifully installed by its owner, the Metropolitan Museum in New York, reconstructing the tiny space and permitting entry into it. For decades now, however, it has not been seen by the public; the room was dismantled and the panels stored, doubtless as a result of a policy decision that the space could be better used otherwise. From the evidence of the catalogue entry, one is left in little doubt that a loan of it was desired for this exhibition but could not be obtained. If its reinstallation at the Met, rumored for years, should soon occur, it would offer the best explanation for the supposed refusal.

The aesthetic effect of it all is indeed glorious, and perhaps especially so to people who have an involvement with the art history of this era. The display of what people made then is grand. And if, in the end, the exhibition has only an indirect linkage to Columbus, the reason for the borrowers' success has a perfectly direct one. None of these owners loaned these precious treasures to Washington to permit an exhibition about the high creativity of late-fifteenth-century art. If a similar show called "Circa 1892" had been attempted, it would obviously not have worked this way. The unique resonance of the date 1492 and its significance to the connections among the continents made the museums of the world available for persuasion by the United States and especially by its national institution for art. In this light it becomes easy to see why the governments of Portugal and the others made such magnanimous gestures. The most unusual gesture, though, came from our own government. Although the money for such tremendous exhibitions commonly comes from corporate foundations, in this instance, as the director writes, Congress received a "specific recommendation" in the national-budget message from the President to supplement the gallery's regular funds. The money was provided over two budget years, to a total of $2.5 million, probably not a major fraction of the cost. Other funds came from organizations in this country and Japan, and also from a Spanish bank, whose gift was earmarked to cover "the gala opening dinner." Well, yes, the wine for the important people is not a small factor in curatorial culture. Admiring all the sleight of hand, one might think it was wrong to betray the trick, were it not that it can't be used again until 2092.

There are also significant ways in which the theme of creation gets affected by the factor of the voyage of discovery, even to the point of distortion, notably in the installation. In the European section, the Bosch triptych, with the saint's horrible dreams of torturing and tempting devils, is the focus of the first room, and the work of Leonardo, with its scientific graphics, is a focus of the last. A notion is evoked that in this era we progress nicely from superstition to true knowledge, despite the fact that the Bosch was made after the Leonardos, or at about the same time. The director's introduction seems to endorse this notion of progress in

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speaking of a "new Humanism growing out of centuries of concentration on otherworldliness." Medievalists may feel some despair on reading that, after generations of efforts to kill off the notion of a dark age when nobody thought of this world as true. Lynn Thorndike, especially, may be recalled, with his exhaustive life work to show to most other specialists' satisfaction that experimental science, strong in the Middle Ages, declined in the time of humanism, making the Renaissance in a way the more otherworldly of the two. The Bosch triptych itself tells us about superstition in a reportorial way, useful to Freudians and scientists who investigate fantasy in people's heads; it is a rendering of real things seen in real hallucinations. In all Bosch's work it may be the most keenly focused in this way, on the nervous human being made wretched by the intrusion of such dreams on his solid waking life, for it is more distinct on the matter than the better-known *Garden of Earthly Delights.* Its fresh cool landscapes, in pale blue sweeps at the horizon line, are relevant and have a kind of Renaissance beauty too easily overlooked as typical of Bosch. The horizon is remote and tiny (tinyness is omnipresent) and blocked from us by dark barriers, but all the more it can ground the whole circumstances in a final tranquility. In the foreground the bugs and monsters, in splendid preservation, are blessed by a similar clean light that forces belief from us, not only in their nastiness but in their physicality. After all, that is not so incompatible with the last room, with its Leonardos of body parts and outdoor specifics, and, even more, its presentation of Dürer's great watercolors of the same years, with their mountain grasses.

"Circa 1492" is brilliant partly because it almost all seems happy, at least after Bosch is passed, and this is due, to a major extent, to everything's seeming *rich.* There is effective use of the occasional huge object, neatly installed to push against the edges of wall surfaces. A rug nineteen feet long is hung vertically, and a tapestry thirty-four feet wide just fits into a catenary curve. (This work, with some historical reference, shows "The Taking of Tangiers," but without any violence. Working from the left, we see an army marching to the middle, where the town is unpeopled but enlivened with roof and water patterns; the march resumes further to the right, with the exit of the defeated.) A good number of quite small objects are of precious materials and show off their glitter, among them a Turkish battle-axe "damascened with gold." The culmination perhaps is a cup of "cast zinc, turquoise, rubies, and emeralds." Potsherds are absent. We find an age brilliant not only in discovery and creation, but, more immediately, in consumption and display. The period appears to have been something like a handsome exhibition: our vision of the era comes to fuse with the installation. Ought we to have been told about beheadings and plagues? Such things are not entirely absent. The catalogue entry for Dürer's drawing of "Katherina, the Moorish servant of a Portuguese factor" in the Netherlands, briefly mentions the bringing from Africa to Europe at the time of some 150,000 slaves—Columbus did nothing original in this respect—some of whom were "baptized and then freed amid great pomp." Reproduced in the catalogue but not a part of the display (it is one of the several works belonging to the Gallery included by reference but left in their permanent rooms) is Grünewald's little Crucifixion, where the Christ shows plague sores. The Leonardo drawings do not include his hanged man, nor do we have the grander one by Andrea del Sarto. The great artists were equally committed to a serious view of the true world in these subjects as in those emphasized here of discovery and creation. To get that range, the visitor is on his own, and probably needs to be a historian of some kind. For most visitors, "Circa 1492" may work best without the history at all, as a rare sequence of star turns. It is probably just ungrateful to ask that the exhibition be what it is not, when it is already more than just about any other assemblage of great things.

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Music

Perahia in London and on disc

by Samuel Lipman

The American pianist Murray Perahia, born in New York in 1947, is one of the few exceptions to the rule that major instrumental performing careers in classical music are still made only by artists of European birth and training. Along with the cellist Yo-Yo Ma (actually born in Paris but brought up and educated in this country), Perahia is now a great international success, concertizing and recording to virtually unanimous critical and public acclaim.

A piano student of Jeannette Haien, Arthur Balsam, and Mieczyslaw Horszowski, Perahia attended the Mannes College in New York, where he studied conducting with Carl Bamberger; he participated during four summers in pianist Rudolf Serkin's famed Marlboro Music Festival. He also served for a short time as Serkin's teaching assistant at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. Perahia has been the recipient of many prestigious honors, including the Kosciuszko Chopin Prize and first place in the 1972 Leeds International Pianoforte Competition; he shared the 1975 Avery Fisher Prize with cellist Lynn Harrell.

Despite his American training, Perahia has (at least from his late twenties) felt strongly the pull of English musical life. For many years he was associated with the composer Benjamin Britten and the tenor Peter Pears at their Aldeburgh Festival. He has lived for the past twelve years, along with his wife and two young sons, in the London suburb of Ealing.

Perahia is a widely recorded pianist. In 1972, he became the first pianist in almost ten years to be signed to an exclusive contract by what was then called CBS Masterworks; on the CBS label Perahia thus joined the fabled Vladimir Horowitz. From the beginning the Perahia records flowed from CBS, and now that the label has been absorbed, whiskers, grin, and backlist all, by the Japanese hard- and software electronics conglomerate Sony, he continues to record his playing and often his conducting: with the English Chamber Orchestra, he has recorded all the Mozart piano concertos, appearing in these popular works as both pianist and conductor. He has recorded all five Beethoven concertos with the Amsterdam Concertgebouw under Bernard Haitink, both Chopin concertos with the Israel Philharmonic under Zubin Mehta, many Beethoven sonatas, and some of the largest (and also the smallest) works of Schubert, Schumann, and Chopin. Recently, he has ventured into new musical territory: in the past year, the Sony Classical label has released his performances of virtuoso solo music by Liszt, Franck, and Rachmaninov.

This past November, Perahia appeared at London's large Royal Festival Hall and the smaller Queen Elizabeth Hall in a three-concert series simply entitled "Murray Perahia & Friends: Mozart Celebrations." The first concert, in the Royal Festival Hall, presented (with the orchestra of the Academy

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of Saint Martin in the Fields) three Mozart concertos, the K.413/387a,[1] K.503, and K.482; the second, in Queen Elizabeth Hall, was to present (with clarinettist Harold Wright, soprano Arleen Auger, and members of the Vermeer Quartet) the Mozart Clarinet Trio K.498, six songs, and the Piano Quartet K.478; the final concert, at the Royal Festival Hall, was to contain a program of Mozart piano works played by Perahia.

I was quite familiar with several of the many Perahia recordings. My impression of his playing in Chopin,[2] Mozart,[3] and Beethoven[4] was that it was fleet, musical in a small-scale way, and prevailingly sweet but bland. I had not, prior to this past fall, heard him in concert. My attention was now drawn to him because of his extraordinary prominence in the October issue of the English publication *Gramophone*, still the best classical-record magazine in the world even though rather too obviously a prime venue for record-company publicity. In this issue of the *Gramophone*, I found a long interview with Perahia by the esteemed English critic Alan Blyth. Here, all in one issue of the magazine, were two pages of gosh-gee-whiz journalism celebrating (or, more accurately, self-celebrating) Perahia, complete with two Sony-supplied photographs, plus a larger photograph which served as the *Gramophone*'s cover; a full-page Sony advertisement for Perahia recordings; and two detailed—and rapturous—reviews of the three Perahia CDs released in England in the month of the *Gramophone*'s appearance.

I cannot say that the Perahia interview did much to change my mind about the pianist. The interview was a compendium of upbeat chatter, conveying an impression of simultaneous greatness, success, and humility. The opening of the interview deserves quotation as an example of how musical artists are presented to the public today:

> Murray Perahia remains as when I first met him some 15 years ago—sincere, earnest, slyly humorous, willing to discuss his approach to his art openly and without a trace of pretension. Relaxed in the garden of his secluded hotel at Salzburg after a much-lauded solo recital the night before, he talked freely of what had occurred since I last interviewed him four years ago. When I suggested that the move into the late-romantic music of Liszt, Franck and Rachmaninov was a new departure, he suggested that much had changed in his outlook since our last encounter. "I've always wanted to branch out into new pastures and meet new challenges, but I think that the crucial thing that happened to me was my friendship with Vladimir Horowitz in the three years before his death [in 1989]. It started through Mozart. He was about to record K488, and I received messages to get in touch with him . . . One day he said to me that in order to be more than a virtuoso you first had to be a virtuoso, and he then encouraged me into this repertory of Liszt, Rachmaninov, and Franck . . . It was a great encouragement and incentive. We had many evenings together at the piano, talking through a lot of music. He used to say 'I'm not teaching you—I give you tips', generously as one artist to another —for which I'm eternally grateful."

What Perahia feels toward Horowitz he feels (albeit to a lesser extent) toward such keyboard luminaries as Solomon, Schnabel, Kempff, Arrau, and Serkin. All these worthies are for Perahia his mentors and, by implication, his peers (and, in the case of Horowitz and the A-major Mozart Con-

1 The first number, K.413, refers to the succession in the order of Mozart's compositions established in the first catalogue (1862) made by Ludwig von Köchel; the second, after the slash, refers to its assigned number in the most recent edition (1964) of Köchel.

2 As in Perahia's recording of the Chopin Preludes, on CBS LP M 33507 (1976). The dates in parentheses in this and the following footnotes refer to the date either of recording or of first issue.

3 In the Mozart concertos K.466 (1977) and K.595 (1979) on CBS CD MK 42241, and K.246 and K.482, on CBS LP M 35869 (1980).

4 As in the Beethoven concertos Nos. 3 and 4, on CBS LP IM 39814 (1986).

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certo K.488, by implication the recipient of his suggestions). And at the end of the interview, Perahia talks about his desire to play Scarlatti, yet another Horowitz specialty. The reader's impression of all this can only be that whatever else might be said about Perahia as an artist, he can hardly be faulted for his choice of models.

By chance, I was in London the first week of November, just in time to hear the first concert of Perahia's friendly Mozart series, and it seemed to me a splendid chance to hear him in a live concert under the best conditions. The Royal Festival Hall, built in 1951 and a monument to British pluck in the dreary days following the end of World War II, made its usual impression: low-class artsy-craftsy in its foyer spaces, and handsome in the auditorium itself. The hall was packed, with a remarkable preponderance of younger people in the higher-priced seats. The Academy of Saint Martin in the Fields orchestra filed onto the stage just after the starting hour of 7:30 had passed, followed immediately by Kenneth Sillito, the orchestra's leader (in American parlance, the concertmaster), and Perahia. The orchestra—with eight first violins, six seconds, four violas, four cellos, and two basses, in addition to the necessary winds, brass, and tympani—tuned a bit, and without further ado the concert began.

I assume that Perahia had carefully prepared the orchestra in rehearsal; he did no actual conducting during the performance, leaving the cueing and such end-of-section tempo adjustments as there were to the leader's generally unobtrusive commands. It is currently fashionable to say that live performances sound quite different from recordings, and convey an altogether greater sense of immediacy and intensity. It was not so on this occasion: Perahia live was, to a fault, Perahia recorded.

Three different Mozart concertos—the first (F Major, K.413/387a) rather modest and relatively unassuming, the second (C major, K.503) one of Mozart's most imposing masterpieces in any form, and the third (E flat Major, K.482) at once large-scale and gay: three works admirably contrasted—by Mozart, albeit not by Perahia. I suppose it was a tell-tale sign that the sublime K.503, a composition in the spirit of Beethoven in its symphonic character and pianistic brilliance, as well as in the poignance of its noble melodies, came before the intermission, rather than at the concert's end. There are perhaps only two real reasons why Perahia might have chosen to end the concert with the more pleasant K.482 rather than the massive K.503: he wanted the audience to go away happy, or he failed to recognize the incomparable weight of the K.503.

Neither reason speaks terribly well for the pianist. If I were a betting man, I would put my money on Perahia's lack of recognition of the relative stature of the K.503. If this were indeed the reason, it would accord well with the general characterlessness of the solo playing throughout the evening. It was not simply that Perahia made little attempt to differentiate between the varying moods and ambition of each concerto; within each separate piece he failed to differentiate between movements and moods, and even, in a curious sense, between fast and slow passages. Everything flowed, his scales pearled, and his finger-work was limpid. Each melody was musically played, but risklessly, as if all that counted was not to make an ugly sound, or to allow any single note to stick out of the consistent well-mannerredness that has always so marked Perahia's playing.

Perhaps some of the concert's pallor was due to the decision to, in effect, play without a conductor. It is trite to say that the main function of the conductor in a performance is to keep everyone together; less tritely put, the main function of the conductor is to take musical chances in varying the pulse and the tempo—and still keep everyone together. When there is no conductor—and a leader/concertmaster merely raising and lowering his bow at the beginnings and ends of sections is not a conductor but a traffic light—no chances can be taken. Everything must be done *exactly* as it was prepared in the rehearsals. Such exactitude means per-

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fect regularity in the performance at all times; each note must be played exactly when it was planned to be played; it is perhaps a bit unfair to say that the operative motto for the orchestra and the soloist in this concert was "No surprises, please, we're English." Stripped, then, of the possibility of varying pulse and tempo, the performers, including the orchestra and especially the soloist, must do everything with variations of dynamics, phrasing, and what would in the piano be called touch and in the orchestra timbre. And so minute differences in the character of individual notes and delicate and cautious phrasing become the only expressive options available to such leaderless musicians. With great skill—and there can be no doubt that Perahia and the orchestra of the Academy of Saint Martin in the Fields possess just such skill—the results can be pleasant and even remarkable. But they cannot be distinctive, individual, or commanding. To play Mozart this way is to miss the greatness of the music, and put in its place a kind of supine comfort.

As the interview in the *Gramophone* I mentioned earlier makes clear, Perahia is hardly comfortable with merely playing Mozart, even though by far his greatest success as a pianist has in the past been achieved in just this music. The fruits of the attempts to "branch out into new pastures" that he discussed in the interview have recently become available on CD in England, and they include *Murray Perahia: The Aldeburgh Recital*, including works by Beethoven, Rachmaninov, Schumann, and Liszt, [5] and *Murray Perahia Plays Franck and Liszt*.[6] Listening to these discs suggests that branching out, however exciting as a metaphor it may be for a musical career, may not be a simple task for Perahia to accomplish.

It seems to me that Perahia's problems start with the Beethoven Thirty-two Variations in C minor (WoO 80), the very first composition on the *Aldeburgh Recital* disc. This is a middle-period piece, dating from 1806, and is thus roughly contemporary with the Fourth Symphony, the Fourth Piano Concerto, and the Violin Concerto. Musically, the Variations are each of them short jewel-like creations, combining seriousness and vitality in a way that only Beethoven could. Pianistically, they are a severe test for any virtuoso, demanding from the performer, among many other attributes, strong rhythm and excellent repeated and double notes. The standard of virtuoso accomplishment in this music is set by the 1934 Horowitz recording.[7] Doubtless Horowitz is an impossible standard to apply today in this music—but, after all, it is Perahia himself who spoke in the *Gramophone* interview about Horowitz giving him tips "generously as one artist to another." Perahia's recording, heard against his own chosen standard, is a pale thing indeed. What is brilliance in the fast variations in Horowitz is heaviness in Perahia; what is delicacy in the repeated notes in Horowitz is caution in Perahia; what is precise rhythm in the famous three-notes-against-four passages (famous, that is, to generations of suffering piano students) in Horowitz is muffled in Perahia.

The story is the same with the rest of Perahia's playing on the two new CDs I have heard. On the *Aldeburgh* CD containing the Beethoven, Perahia also gives us the Schumann *Faschingsschwank aus Wien* ("Carnival Jest from Vienna"); in his performance this centerpiece of Schumann's piano music completely lacks its properly genial and whimsical quality; instead one hears a musical duty being painstakingly fulfilled. In the Liszt Twelfth Hungarian Rhapsody, Perahia lacks both feeling for the flashy style of the work and the strength to triumph in the work's climaxes. The four Rachmaninov *Etudes-Tableaux* that end the CD, though played with an attempt at pristine clarity, seem altogether less imposing at Perahia's hands than they do (in two of the *Etudes*) in

5 Sony Classical CD SK 46 437.

6 Sony Classical CD SK 47 180.

7 This performance, along with many other pre-World War II Horowitz wonders, is now available on CD in an EMI set, C4S 7635382.

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Horowitz's 1967 recording;[8] fine as Horowitz's recorded performances are, for the ideal interpreter of this music—a music, I might add, that only lives fully in an ideal performance—one must, not surprisingly, go to the 1940 recordings of the composer himself.[9] The other Perahia CD, *Murray Perahia Plays Franck and Liszt*, opens with the César Franck *Prélude, Chorale, and Fugue* (1884). One of the first great French large-scale piano works, the Franck requires a ripe and deeply-penetrating tone to express the close parallel in the composer's music between its extreme chromaticism and the pain believers perceive Christ suffered on the Cross; the mystical-religious mood of this music is only sealed by Franck's extraordinary use (whether purposeful or not is not known) of the bell-motif in Wagner's *Parsifal* (1882) to end the *Prélude, Chorale, and Fugue* in triumph. This work is one of the spiritual monuments of the second half of the nineteenth century, and faced with its challenges, both metaphysical and pianistic, Perahia seems only able to play the notes. In his performance, there is no pain, there is no triumph, only, as in Perahia's rendition of the very different Liszt Hungarian Rhapsody, dutiful piano playing. Those who wish to hear this music in its true greatness must go back to the 1929 Cortot recording, made in London in the Small Queen's Hall, which was tragically destroyed by Nazi bombing in the Blitz.[10]

Immediately following the Franck on the Perahia CD is Franz Liszt's famous *Mephisto Waltz*. To go from the Franck to the Liszt is merely to traverse the distance from God to the Devil; one can only wonder at the sublime heedlessness of those responsible for the recording—or perhaps at the heedlessness of Perahia himself—that such an immediate succession of irreconcilable opposites was put forward. Liszt's *Mephisto Waltz* is written not to Goethe's Faust but to that of the vastly more Dionysian Nikolaus Lenau (1802-1850); the spirit of the composition is well conveyed by Lenau's words, printed in some editions of the music: *So eine Dirne lustentbrannt / Schmeckt besser als ein Foliant* ("So a wench ignited by desire tastes better than a tome"). The pianistic demands of the Liszt are enormous, ranging from repeated heavy chords to blindingly fast passage work and keyboard skips fraught with extreme danger (at least in live performance). In the few lyrical sections, the music is sometimes excited, sometimes languorous, expressing the extreme of a deracinated sensuality. Not only is Perahia's playing clotted and effortful in the brilliant passages with which the work abounds; in the lyrical passages, Perahia is totally bereft of the breathless passion plainly indicated by the musical notation. Lovers of piano playing as a way into the heart of great music will await the CD reissue of the marvelous performance of more than forty years ago by the short-lived but magnificent American virtuoso William Kapell (1922-1953).[11]

A word in conclusion: only in the case of Perahia's recordings have I compared his playing to the recordings of other, and greater, pianists. The Mozart concertos I heard him play in London were, of course, played live, without the control and even manipulation possible in the act of recording. But knowledgeable listeners to Mozart piano concertos will nonetheless, despite all the allowances properly to be made for what happens unedited in the concert hall, still want to hold on just a while longer to their Artur Schnabel and Edwin Fischer recordings. All music lovers look forward eagerly to the day when these records can be consigned to the memories of the old and the crotchety. That much-to-be-wished-for time, as Murray Perahia and all too many of his colleagues prove, is not here yet.

8 These live Horowitz concert performances were available on CBS LP M30464.

9 The Rachmaninov performances of his solo piano works are now to be found on an RCA Gold Seal CD, 7766-2-RG.

10 My copy of this performance is on an EMI Référénce LP, 2902671.

11 My copy of this performance is on an RCA LP, LM-1058.

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Theater

Othertimes, otherwheres

by Donald Lyons

Time has played some odd tunes upon Arthur Miller's 1953 play *The Crucible*, just revived as the first offering of the National Actors Theatre, Tony Randall's grandiosely styled group. The new production begins attractively. We are lost in a forest: great beetling green treetrunks tower weirdly over a barely suggested bedroom. Set designer David Jenkins suggests a darkness lurking both outside and inside the Calvinist interior. (It is an expressionist vocabulary used also in the *Dancing at Lughnasa* set.) For a second, we await a rich, complex drama. Then, alas, the play starts; actors take the stage in wigs and in colonially monochromatic cotton and gingham, and they commence to utter the pseudo-colonial cotton-and-gingham prose of Miller: "On Sunday let you come with me, and we'll walk the farm together; I never see such a load of flowers on the earth," etc. This purports to be the speech of an upright yeoman farmer; similar slight deformations of idiom mark all the characters. The story, of course, tells of the heroic resistance offered by this farmer to the witch-hunters of Salem in 1692. But Miller's dramaturgy is amazingly inept, blurring the contour of even the melodrama he wishes to create. The hero is guilty of adultery and must squirm with shame before his righteous, chilly wife; his partner in sin is the young woman who is leading the chorus of confessing and accusing witches and is apparently intending to have the hero's wife hanged for a witch. But she and a bunch of local maidens *have* been out dancing in the nude and making frog soup in the moonlight under the guidance of a voodoo priestess. So what's going on here anyway? Are the adultery and voodoo mere red (so to speak) herrings? It goes without saying (or rather would that it did) that the various Reverends and Judges and Governors who do the persecuting are venal or insane or both; but it does look, to judge from what we hear about, as if they're on to something. Hang the lot of them, I say. And then hang the hangers.

Miller's lack of narrative coherence—lack of attention, almost—means that a strong directorial mind and hand are needed on *The Crucible*. Director Yossi Yzraely has not that mind or hand. At his frequent worst, he lines people up in a row and has them declaim. At his best, he plants triangles (husband—wife—maid) and rotates them about the playing area. There is, too, much sitting and moaning. Exciting acting can galvanize limp melodrama, but the National Actors Theatre runs to stiff bombast in a stew of styles: Martin Sheen's farmer is stolidly worried, in a Midwestern vein; Michael York's inquisitorial Reverend is vaguely solicitous, in a West End vein; Fritz Weaver's bullying Governor is authoritarian, in a powerful but monotonous vein. The young women, especially Madeleine Potter and Jane Adams (of *I Hate Hamlet* fame), do impart an aliveness to the proceedings in their depiction of hysteria, but they are also

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finally let down by the sketchy script, which largely disdains to investigate the psychic sources of the hysteria.

The Crucible at the Belasco is thus a tedious and ineptly told story. But it is not an innocent one. For it was, in 1953, Broadway's answer to McCarthyism, and its revival in 1991 doubtless intends a message for our day. About the inadequacy of the play to the issues of 1953, Robert Warshow in *Commentary* and Eric Bentley in *The New Republic* wrote definitively *in* 1953. Bentley, writing from the Left, saw the fundamental point: "[T]he parallel . . . is true in that people today are being persecuted on quite chimerical grounds. It is untrue in that communism is not, to put it mildly, merely a chimera. . . . Indeed, the analogy between 'red-baiting' and witch hunting can seem complete only to communists, for only to them is the menace of communism as fictitious as the menace of witches. The non-communist will look for certain reservations and provisos. In *The Crucible*, there are none." (Bentley went on to make it clear he is referring not to Miller's unknown actual political allegiances but to his unexamined cultural assumptions.)

For all its faults in 1953, however, *The Crucible* does seem to make a new point in 1991. And it is not a point about Jesse Helms or Karen Finley or Robert Mapplethorpe. Rather, Arthur Miller, in a recent interview, gives the clue: "There was no response to McCarthyism, except for *The Crucible*. And when I was attacked, I was never defended. I think that's unforgivable. At the same time, I now recognize that this was one of the blackest periods in Russia. When you had Stalin around, the magnitude of the cruelty was unmatched. You've got to be either God or the Devil to figure this out." How much irony, how much tragic irony, is packed into that little word "now." What indeed does the cultural ambiance of *The Crucible* suggest today, with its show trials, signed confessions, conspiracies real and imagined, fanatical and irrational theology, murdering careerist bureaucracy, personal vendettas masquerading behind ideological correctitude, mass hangings, smuggling in of taboo music from abroad, joyless grimness of life, and so on? Salem in 1692? New York or Los Angeles in 1953? Or . . . Moscow and Prague and Budapest and Warsaw in 1953? Arthur Miller, by one of history's pranks, turns out to have written an objectively (as Marxists used to say) anti-Stalinist play. But it is a *bad* anti-Stalinist play. A far superior anti-Stalinist play had, in fact, opened on Broadway two seasons earlier: Sidney Kingsley's adaptation of Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*. I hereby call it to Tony Randall's attention.

The matter of Salem, it is refreshing to recall, was treated by a great American artist, who wrote about it with an authority born of a deep knowledge of human history and the human heart. Nathaniel Hawthorne rejected persecutorial Calvinism as firmly as anyone, but saw its roots not in melodramatic villainy and heroism but in everyman's dreams and blood. "And when he had lived long, and was borne to his grave, a hoary corpse, followed by Faith, an aged woman, and children and grand-children, a goodly procession, besides neighbors, not a few, they carved no hopeful verse upon his tomb-stone; for his dying hour was gloom." Thus ends Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," a small masterpiece about the terrible propinquity of Salem to the surrounding forest. Contrast Hawthorne's grim close with the smug and tinny exaltation of Miller's curtain: "He have his goodness now. God forbid I take it from him!"

The Public Theater has been up to, respectively, no good and not bad. The former: *In the Jungle of Cities*, a nasty and muddled little fantasy set in Chicago, written by Brecht in his mid-twenties. Chicago was to Brecht what Italy was to Webster—an imagined "otherwhere" where sex and politics were unbuttonedly raw. To quote Martin Esslin: "Shlink, a middle-aged, well-to-do timber merchant, a Malay from Yokohama, becomes obsessed with the desire to dominate the will of young Garga, a clerk in a lending library. Garga refuses to sell his

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opinion about a book." But soon Garga is renting Shlink a room in the family apartment, pimping his sister to Shlink, and at last breaking out of jail to save Shlink from a lynch mob. Critics have seized on a few scraps of Rimbaud in the dialogue to suppose that the whole thing is a covert study of a homosexual relationship, but *Jungle* is in truth about nothing coherent at all. With a fecund irresponsibility, Brecht just glued together a few random items lying around in his mind. To make sense of *Hamlet*, said T. S. Eliot, "we should have to understand things which Shakespeare did not understand himself." Ditto, in spades, for *Jungle* and Brecht.

The New York Shakespeare Festival and Mabou Mines have conferred the direction of this play on Anne Bogart. *Jungle* is already a jangly, discontinuous, arrhythmic work; it wants simplicity and clarity in presentation. What Bogart layers onto the text is a mannerism of diction wherein every sentence's THIRD word is screamed and-the-rest-is-garbled and actors FREEZE after utterances. Nonsense is thus invoked to explicate nonsense. An already expressionist play is crazily subjected to a sophomoric deconstruction; it is like being at a convention of performance artists doing *Our Town* in such a way as to demonstrate their superiority to its naïve optimisms. A choruslike person behaves like Sam Kinison; everybody else more or less resembles Pee-wee Herman. It is a nightmare.

On the other hand, *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* is one of the undersea finds of the Shakespeare canon—at once mystery, surprise, hybrid, hinge, and orphan. In early 1608, having recently completed three antique tragedies—*Antony and Cleopatra*, *Timon of Athens*, *Coriolanus*—Shakespeare came across a play he thought worth refashioning for his company at the Globe. How much he altered is disputed; most accord him the last three acts. It is a kaleidoscopic romance full of shipwreck, piracy, rebirth, magical kingdoms, incest, love. And it ushered in Shakespeare's period of romances about time and lost wives and daughters; *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* were to follow. "What images return / O my daughter," wrote T. S. Eliot in "Marina," the wonderful lyric inspired by this play. *Pericles* is a play not fully emerged from the marble; it is half fairy tale, half exotic travelogue, and woven throughout is a meditation on fortune.

Michael Greif stages *Pericles* in a style that might be called post-Peter Brook playpen, with perhaps a nod to Peter Sellars playfulness, too. The action, zig-zagging around the Mediterranean and leaping the years, opens, as fairy tales do, in a malign place, Antioch, where a perverse father-daughter love has resulted in the hangings of the daughter's suitors; a riddle is, predictably, involved. Pericles, a neighbor-prince all in black, comes seeking a wife, guesses the secret, and flees back to Tyre. There, in white shirt and black pants, he broods Hamletically before deciding to run away from a hit-man from Antioch. Next stop: Tarsus, where tropical tyrants loll munching dainties during a famine; Pericles relieves the famine and gets a cardboard statue erected in his honor. Storm at sea; blue flashes. Third stop: Pentapolis, where chortling fishermen —the usual Shakespearean clowns—take the beached Pericles to court, where there is in progress a medieval tournament complete with playing-card royals, cardboard horses, and journalist with microphone. The tone is airy and jocose; Pericles, in gray, wins the tourney, is made to dance all by himself, and then gets to tango with a smitten princess, Thaisa, healthily beloved by her blue-clad kingly father. Wedding. Storm at sea: Thaisa dies birthing Marina and is dropped overboard, only to be resurrected by a magus on shore in Ephesus, where she enters the convent of Diana. Pericles, in black, confides the baby girl to the care of the tropical tyrants of Tarsus. (The logic of *Pericles*' story is quite oneiric.) Jump fourteen years: Marina, about to be killed by the tyrants, is seized by pirates (film footage projected) and put to service in a Mytilene bordello, hilariously staffed by a Miami Beach yenta-in-pastel madam and a Hispanic henchboy in a yellow shirt and black-and-white striped pants.

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Marina, far from being corrupted, seduces her would-be seducers to goodness and virtue. At sea: Pericles, mute and disheveled with grief at his daughter's reported death, arrives in Mytilene harbor. Anagnorisis: Marina and Pericles kneel to each other; he lifts her aloft; the troubled seas of father-daughter relationships are at last calm. Final anagnorisis at the blue temple of Diana, where mother rejoins father and daughter. We are told by the chorus (who is the poet Gower, one of the earlier tellers of the tale) of the destruction of the wicked by fire; water has only seemed to destroy in the play but has in reality preserved, cleansed, nourished, redeemed.

Greif's good-natured direction, Gabriel Berry's amusing costumes, Jill Jaffe's enchanting music (played by three instrumentalists to the side of the stage), Frances Aronson's lighting, John Arnone's supple sets —all are of a sweet, light-hearted piece and the piece fits the play. True, the recognition scenes do not evoke profound emotion, but that is as much Shakespeare's fault as the production's. The brisk, cool, pro forma conventionalities of the wind-up scenes defy tears; it is otherwise with later romance wind-ups like those of *The Winter's Tale* or earlier ones like that of *Measure for Measure*. *Pericles* solicits a jaunty stylization and gets pretty much what it deserves at the Public.

The acting is, by and large, disciplined and sober and articulate. Some is a good deal better than that: Campbell Scott brings to Pericles a sense that he wishes he were playing Hamlet; he works hard to lay down a naturalistic, behavioral through-line in the fun-fair universe of the play. But this slightly bemused earnestness works for the poor prince, this tennis ball of fortune. Scott is a noble performer who perhaps lacks irony —as does Pericles.

It is impossible not to advert to the fact that Campbell Scott's father, George C. Scott, playing Richard III down on the East River some thirty years ago, headlined Joseph Papp's debut as New York entrepreneur of Shakespeare. There is much, much to criticize in the late Mr. Papp's actualizations of his goals, but, for a deal of pleasure and for a civilizing, democratic dream, I salute his memory.

Martha Plimpton, playing both the daughter of the incestuous Antiochan king and Marina, has a slim, firm, fierce, sapling-like presence, as of Nausicaa; her Marina has anger and eloquence. One would like to see Plimpton's Isabella to Scott's Angelo, or her Ophelia to his Hamlet. Byron Jennings deftly managed the various notes of the evil Antiochan king, the good king of Pentapolis (who only *pretends* to go fee-fi-fo-fum at the thought of his daughter's betrothal), and the lecherous-but-converted-by-Marina governor of Mytilene. Cordelia Gonzalez brought a beautiful gravity to Thaisa. Sandra McClain made an oooh-chile juicy queen of Tarsus; Bobo Lewis was a funny madam of Mytilene; and Arnold Molina fleshed out and humanized her sleazy assistant.

Having recently suffered through *Prospero's Books*, the arch Peter Greenaway pillaging of *The Tempest* on film, I appreciated the modesty and judiciousness of the Public, first in choosing a play comfortably in their range and then in serving, not savaging, it. Almost. Going in, I asked my companion, "How many Clarence Thomas jokes do you think there'll be in *Pericles*?" She guessed five; I went for ten. There was in the event only one—the denizens of the Mytilene/Miami brothel are watching the hearings on TV. This qualifies as admirable restraint. One is always thankful for fortune's small favors.

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Fiction chronicle

Big & bad

by Bruce Bawer

The American is the New Man, creating himself afresh; and for many a stateside writer, the novel has represented an opportunity to try on alternate identities. In his "Rabbit" books, John Updike, successful author, imagines himself as a failed jock, proud not of cerebral but of physical exploits. Likewise, in his would-be magnum opus, *Harlot's Ghost*, Norman Mailer—wife-stabber, Pentagon stormer, and all-around anti-establishment Rebel Without a Clue—re-creates himself as a CIA man, thereby underscoring what we've known all along: that for Fanny Mailer's ambitious son, the question "Which side are you on?" has never been nearly as important as "Are you where the action is?"[1]

Harlot's Ghost consists of two texts. In the first, the "Omega manuscript," Mailer's alter ego, Harry Hubbard, relates the circumstances under which he learned, in 1983, of the apparent death of Hugh "Harlot" Montague, his godfather and CIA mentor and the ex-husband of his wife and cousin, Kittredge (also a CIA agent). Widely regarded in the Company as a "burnt-out case," Harry has an unadventurous job: he works on pro-CIA thrillers and serves as Harlot's ghostwriter (which accounts for one of the title's many meanings); he's also supposed to be drafting a definitive study of the KGB, but has instead been compiling a secret memoir of his career. That memoir, the "Alpha manuscript," which constitutes over nine-tenths of *Harlot's Ghost*, begins in 1955, when Harry—the Yalie scion of an old New England clan (though his mother was a "Jewish princess")—follows in the footsteps of his dad, an old OSS hand, by joining the Company.

Harry's early CIA years are busy ones: in Germany, he takes part in the Berlin tunnel escapade; in Uruguay, he works for a pre-Watergate Howard Hunt; in Miami, he's in on the Bay of Pigs operation. In place of Judith Campbell Exner—the real-life bedmate of Sinatra, Kennedy, and Mafioso Sam Giancana—Mailer gives us a stewardess named Modene Murphy, who sleeps not only with those three worthies but also, naturally, with Harry (who, according to Kittredge, is "just as pretty as Montgomery Clift"). He's privy to the inside skinny on Marilyn Monroe's death, the J. Edgar Hoover-Bobby Kennedy rift, and the JFK assassination—all of which, though "Alpha" takes us only as far as 1965 (the story, we're told, is "TO BE CONTINUED"), seems to point toward a Grand Unified Conspiracy Theory that before we're done, assuming Mailer writes a sequel, will take in the deaths of RFK and Martin Luther King, Watergate, Iran-Contra, the Savings and Loan scandal, etc., and thereby solve the riddle of America, Mailer's love and obsession, once and for all.

Or so (one suspects) Mailer hopes. In point of fact, though none of his books has offered so panoramic a view of the world ac-

1 *Harlot's Ghost*, by Norman Mailer; Random House, 1310 pages, $30.

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cording to Mailer, *Harlot's Ghost* doesn't come anywhere near to being, as its dust-jacket claims, "the culmination of one of America's great literary journeys, a novel to fulfill Mailer's lifelong obsession with the mystery of America." Quite simply, the further one gets into this book the less it reads like a novel; gradually, all one's hopes of character development, suspense, and dramatic conflict are crushed by the steamroller of amorphous, diaristic narrative (much of it in the form of letters between Harry and Kittredge—who, during the period covered by "Alpha," is still Mrs. Montague, a chastely adoring Cousin Daisy to his earnest young Nick Carraway). Even grammatical rules are steamrollered. Mailer routinely employs the incorrect form "equally as," replaces "I" with "myself," says "so soon as" instead of "as soon as," and dangles modifiers (including one in the book's very first sentence). Throughout the book, his prose wavers from wordy to workmanlike, its generally flat tone often giving way to a synthetic-seeming portentousness, heavy on highfalutin abstractions and artificial syntax, with which Mailer's longtime readers will not be unfamiliar: "I had signed up with him [Harlot] as if he were fate itself. There are more metastases in guilt than in cancer itself. . . . I was like an iron filing skittering about on a plate as magnets are shifted beneath. Powerful as gods are those magnets." Mailer has never been known as an exquisite stylist; if the writing here is especially slovenly and redundant, however, one has the impression that it is because he has been more than usually fixated on filling pages. Just as many an architect has sought to build not the most beautiful but the tallest skyscraper, it seems clear that the guiding aspiration here was less to write something great than to write something big.

It seems clear, too, that Mailer wants us to see *Harlot's Ghost* as mirroring America's bigness, in the same way as, say, *An American Tragedy* or *U.S.A.*, and wants us to see the CIA—whose operatives live in an atmosphere of betrayal and subterfuge and uncertainty, and who must, from time to time, do evil in order to serve good—as the ultimate symbol of America's moral ambiguity, an emblem as equivocal as Hawthorne's scarlet letter and Melville's white whale. Mailer goes out of his way to incorporate allusions to native literary touchstones: Harry hikes up Mount Katahdin, apparently in order to make us think of Thoreau; Kittredge's first name is Hadley, an apparent *hommage* to Hemingway's first wife; Hunt suggests that Harry use the name of Robert Jordan (the hero of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*) as a cover; and Harry compares kissing Kittredge to "picking up a great novel and reading the first sentence. *Call me Ishmael.*" To Harry, the "primary fact" is that he is a Hubbard, descended from Bradford and Fidelity Hubbard, who came to Massachusetts in 1627; and the name Bradford, of course, brings to mind William Bradford, who in his *History of Plymouth Plantation* established the idea of America as a setting for sacred drama, in whose settlers the "worke of God" was "manifest."

This Puritan view figures crucially in *Harlot's Ghost.* Harry, Hugh, and Kittredge are all Christians who labor on behalf of "this Christ-inspired civilization" and who, if they do something evil in the line of duty, see it as "transcendental wickedness that partakes of goodness because its aim is to gain the rightful day." Harlot, who calls his CIA lectures the "High Holies," is described as "a manifest of the Lord" by Harry, who proclaims: "What a man of the cloth he would have made!" Kittredge quotes Harlot to the effect that "we were blessed in our work at the Agency because the best and the worst in ourselves could work together on a noble venture." And she herself is plainly supposed to sound like a Puritan-style Manichaean when she declares that "[i]f God is trying to tell us anything, it is that every idea we have of Him, and of the universe, is dual. Heaven and Hell, God and the Devil, good and evil. . . ." Significantly, Mailer's epigraphs—from Ephesians, Vanbrugh, and Roethke—all refer to the struggle, in either society or the soul, between good and evil.

Make no mistake: Mailer's aim here is not

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to paint his characters as self-righteous, unreflecting zealots. On the contrary, Harry is constantly aware that "[w]e cannot know the moral value of our actions. We may think ourselves saintly at the exact moment we're toiling for the Devil. Conversely, we can feel unholy and yet be serving God." Harlot warns Harry about both "cheap patriotism" and "cheap Christianity," and is frank about the likenesses in theory between Christianity and Communism, saying that "what's satanic about Communism" is that it "trades on the noblest vein in Christianity. It works the great guilt in us." A Soviet spy notes that while Russians speak of losing their souls, Americans speak of "free-floating anxiety"—but Harry and company *do* worry about losing their souls. Quoth Kittredge, after a project of hers ends in failure and death: "We live in a great moral trusswork, after all. To fight the Opponent, we will dare evil ourselves, and I feel as if I have. Only I did not come back with a compensating good. . . . Have I endangered my soul?" For all their soul-searching, however, Harry, Harlot, and Kittredge share the conviction that there *is* a vital difference between America and the Soviet Union, and that it comes down to the difference between faith and atheism. As Kittredge puts it:

> With all our abominations and excesses, we are a superior society to the Soviets because there is an ultimate restriction upon our behavior —we believe, most of us Americans, in God's judgment upon us (even if it is the last thing one can ever talk about). I cannot emphasize how crucial such a last inner fear, such a modesty of the soul, is to the well-being of society. Without it, the only thing infinite about human beings becomes their vanity, which is to say, their contempt for nature and society. They generate an inner belief that they know a better way to run the world than God. All the horrors of Communism come out of the vanity that they know that God is only a tool employed by the capitalists.

What is one to make of this apparent Trinitarian boosterism by a secular Jew? Surely one can imagine a novelist making out of the materials of *Harlot's Ghost* a profound and provocative work about the moral and spiritual challenges of *Realpolitik*. But Mailer has not done so. Taken though he is with the drama of Christian rhetoric, it is clear that he employs it not because it has a deep and heartfelt meaning for him but because he thinks this sort of oratory appropriate to a would-be Great American Novel. CIA veterans have said that Mailer's understanding of the agency is superficial and unconvincing; the same holds for his understanding of Christian theology. Certainly the spiritual reflections of Harry, Harlot, and Kittredge often recall not Augustine or Aquinas but earlier Mailer novels. Harry, for instance, sounds less like a Millerite than a standard-issue Mailerite when he says that at prep school "God was lust to me," and notes that, in planning Bay of Pigs, he realized that "I would mourn Fidel if we succeeded, mourn him in just the way a hunter is saddened by the vanished immanence of the slain beast. Yes, one fired a bullet into beautiful animals in order to feel nearer to God." Ditto Kittredge (whose CIA work consists mostly of psychological studies testing her theory that human consciousness has two components, a rational "Alpha" and a faith-driven "Omega") when she professes "that God is present when we make love" and "that somewhere in sexual excess—at least for good people, brave people— there is absolution." The Mailer of this novel is, in short, still very much the Mailer of yore, who in his heart of hearts acknowledges only two sacraments: sex and violence. Certainly the Mailer machismo hasn't ebbed: in a line that no one but the author of *An American Dream* could write with a straight face, Harry tells his mistress, "The mark of how much I feel for you . . . is that I love my wife, do you understand, I do love her, yet I still see you." And who but the author of *Marilyn* could have created the double agent who tells Harry that "the glamour attached to the possession of nuclear missiles" is "equal to sex with a movie star"?

If "God was lust" during Harry's preppie

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days, it was, he explains, because he was "introduced to carnal relations during my first year by an assistant chaplain of St. Matthew's." (This happened, incidentally, in a hotel on Washington's H Street, the letter "H"—as in Harry, Harlot, Hunt, heaven, hell, and Hemingway—being of huge, if obscure, import here.) Ever since that signal event, one gathers, Harry has been fighting off a yen for men. His colleague Dix Butler says, "Half of our agents are queer. It comes with the profession." (Both gays and spies, you see, "lead a double life.") Indeed, homosexuality is almost as pervasive in these pages as espionage. Harry makes nervous jokes on the subject, writing Kittredge that a colleague "chose to talk in a lisp as if we were planning a homosexual romp. (God, what if the KGB had a tap? Think of all those fey agents who would be thrown at me in months to come. Hubbard, the jewel of the Andes!)." In Uruguay, his mistress demands that he "prove to me you're not a queer," and later declares: "I bet you are a faggot. Deep down!" It was after spurning a pass by Dix that our hero found a woman and lost his virginity, during which encounter "[p]ictures of her vagina flickered in my brain next to images of his ass, and I started to come, and continued to come, and to come from the separate halves of me, and had a glimpse of the endless fall that may yet be found on our way into the beatitudes." What's going on here? The men-without-women theme has, of course, been popular with American novelists ever since Cooper sent Natty Bumppo into the woods with his faithful Indian companion; many an American hero has been a boy at heart, a Huck Finn who prefers male company and sees women as a threat to his freedom. Doubtless Mailer thinks he is giving us a 1990s version of this motif, a vision of the American male as torn to the depth of his soul between opposing urges, his bisexuality a metaphor for humankind's moral dualism. But what one comes away from this novel with, alas, is a picture of an aging author so desperately insecure about his own manliness, so threatened by women (and inclined to value them not for themselves but for their attachment to certain men), and so helplessly tethered to a pubescent boy's outsized horror of homosexuality, that he is incapable of addressing the topic of sex without coming off as a buffoon. Homosexuality is not a major theme here, then, so much as a running joke —a joke that only Mailer seems not to get.

It should be said that here and there in *Harlot's Ghost* one finds passages to admire—less, perhaps, for their literary merit than for the characters' frank expression of views that one does not expect to see treated sympathetically in a Mailer novel. Harlot attends a performance by Lenny Bruce, whose comedy foreshadows, for him, a bleak future where nothing is private or sacred; and Hunt speaks about how "Americans abroad are engaged in Envy-Control. We've shown the globe a way to live that's clean and prosperous, so they hate us all over the world." Certain episodes, moreover—an espionage class, a simulated KGB interrogation—represent an engaging use of CIA lore and lingo. Yet the debits here far outweigh the credits. There is too little showing and too much telling—in the form of chatty letters, facile Irving Wallace-type gimmicks (such as Harlot's lectures) for shoveling in research, and (by novel's end) excerpts from 1963 *New Republic* articles about Kennedy and Castro. Consequently, with few exceptions, Mailer's people and their emotions —notably Kittredge's oft-avowed infatuation with Harry—don't become real to us. Nor is the spy-world *mise en scène* delineated as convincingly or unsettlingly as in, say, John Le Carré, or the mystery of Harlot's supposed death, once established, ever returned to, let alone resolved. Though Mailer takes on some promising materials, then, he fails utterly to make a novel out of them.

For a quarter of a century, Harold Brodkey has been famous for the unpublished autobiographical novel that influential literary friends—among them Denis Donoghue, Harold Bloom, and Gordon Lish—have compared to the masterworks of Joyce and Proust. It is not an exaggeration to say that

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the novel, which has finally been published as *The Runaway Soul*, has proven to be one of the literary fiascos of all time, and must certainly, if any vestige of justice remains in the literary world, send Brodkey's immense reputation crashing down in Hindenburgian flames.[2] Composed in an effusive, haphazard anti-style that would give Gertrude Stein the bends, the book amounts to a titanically garrulous exercise in narcissism and nostalgia, a psychiatrist's-couch session that makes the later works of Salinger look like so many O. Henry stories and that, like *Harlot's Ghost* (which, alongside it, looks competent and compelling), seems more than anything else the manifestation of its author's compulsion to write something *big*.

Though *The Runaway Soul* reads like coked-up Whitman while *Harlot's Ghost* genuflects toward the American realist tradition (Mailer alludes incessantly to Hemingway and Henry James), there are many parallels between the two novels. Brodkey's autobiographical hero, Wiley Silenowicz—through whose childhood and youth in Depression-era and wartime Saint Louis his chronologically chaotic book meanders—muses endlessly about sex, which to him, as to Hubbard, is a threat, a test, a means of proving one's manhood and exercising one's dominance, and, all in all, a self-centered act that has very little to do with affection for another human being. Like Mailer, Brodkey waxes ludicrously and cryptically cosmic on the subject of coitus: "The poetry of hallucination asks for orgasm—it is a formal command in the bent universe among miracles of racing bits of light." And even more so than Mailer, he makes of his novel an embarrassing testament of sexual confusion and insecurity, in which the protagonist's struggle against homoerotic urges is meant to take on the proportions of a grand heroic drama. Wiley, a self-described "apprentice in sexual reality," worries endlessly about whether he's "queer" and tries to find some reassuring way to define the passions that tear at him. Yet there is little of the tenderness or insight or gentle humor that one might expect a middle-aged narrator to bring to such a subject; for the grown-up Wiley is scarcely less confused and insecure about these matters than his teenage self. Like Harry Hubbard, he was sexually initiated at fourteen by an older male—an event that Brodkey, unlike Mailer, describes at Thomas Wolfean length. He also offers epic accounts of two youthful heterosexual encounters, of which the following is a representative excerpt:

> The sense I had as I fucked—in *that* posture (i.e., bent-legged, rodeo-showy, chest visible: she had begun to say the year before that I had *a beautiful chest*), the prick going in and out of the magic (greasy) shopping bag—was of the world of social ambitions and of aesthetic ones as a readiness for rage that could be utilized in sex or transposed, more commonly, whatever un-Bohemian provincials thought, into *conceit*, either of surrender to despair (at the world) or of one's having, as a form of that, literally a furious rage to live now, to exist, mentally, phallically, willfully, famously—as if one were already entirely or merely largely and famously dead . . . or as a caution-haunted life-thing, full of trails and hints, half-scenes—a hallucination or a dream.

Elsewhere Wiley tells us: "I choose to stake my life, my sanity on immediacy . . . I never had an image of stillness no matter how I pressed myself to—or one of *timelessness*; I have never had an image of *eternity*—only of *this-stuff-going-on* a while longer." Like Mailer, Brodkey is an existentialist, captivated by his own imprudent, impetuous passage through an ever-changing and ever-perilous world; and this novel (whose title surfaces on page 750: "The *runaway soul* goes groping—and plunging—flying and lying—and trying—and dying . . .") is meant not to tell a story, in any conventional sense, but rather to provide a moment-to-moment inventory of Wiley's itinerant spirit. Which is a nice way of saying that the self-absorption here is well-nigh

2 *The Runaway Soul*, by Harold Brodkey; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 835 pages, $30.

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unparalleled: Wiley the adult never tires of telling us that Wiley the boy was tall, lean, attractive, "phallically larger" at fourteen than the seventeen-year-old who deflowered him, and (obnoxious phrase) "nationally smart." So much self-love, so little self-knowledge! To be sure, he also yammers on about his adoptive parents, S. L. and Lila, and, especially, about their sinister daughter, Nonie; but the view he affords of his fellow human beings is so solipsistic that they never really come to life—not even the enigmatic Nonie, with whom he is fascinated and whom he, the "good son," refuses to judge. This book, he insists, "is not about saintliness versus the Nonie-esque" but rather "about the comparison within a time-harried frame of always greatly unexplained lives but accurately modelled on what is possible and always in relation to one another." He may be "the better person—and the better talker and thinker—but not always, not in all circumstances, not for every purpose."

A reader unfortunate enough to read these two hefty tomes back-to-back cannot help reflecting that they are both by writers who, having had it drummed into their heads in childhood that they were geniuses, came to confuse art-making with self-mythologizing and acquired the notion that, in exchange for the brazen flinging of their egos onto the page, the world owes them nothing short of a mother's love. Yet these are books that only a mother *could* love. (In the final analysis, they make better bookends than books.) One might at least expect a document as candid as *The Runaway Soul* to be of psychological or erotic interest. No such luck. Following this particular "stream of consciousness" is less like traveling downriver than like riding a toy train around a circular track; and the bedroom scenes, meanwhile, make sex look so tedious and claustrophobic that they should be required reading in every junior high school in the land: one dose of Brodkey's runaway prose and the kids would lose all interest in premarital high jinks. Admittedly, once in a long while Brodkey proffers a passage, such as the following, that effectively captures the mood of a memory:

> I lit a cigarette (back then in the 1950s) and, in the restless currents of meaning, substituted actual motion. I got up and said, 'Got to piss,' and I went, naked as I was, through the shadows into the small bathroom, above Sixty-eighth Street, the lights, the late night below, the whalelike rush of something, a truck, a van. The acerbic smoke, the cold tile, the faintly slide-y bathroom rug mean that I am here—in this order of factuality—and I pause, in the shadows: I am thin-bodied still, not as thin as at birth or when I was fourteen, but thin: the line of connection is recognizably present for me of some of my outward selves in other moments, ones that have occurred; and the longing—the anger at longing and the passionate wish not to long for things but to have them and to be at rest, ashore, asleep, in love, not in love, whatever—is a longing for an absolute, the single absolute thing, the sentence, the one statement, the word, the syllable, the breath of the intention to speak in which the novel, this one, and the moments, and their reality, are encapsulated, are held as purely —well, as sensibly—as a seed in a cotyledon or as a baby in a womb or as my eye in its socket or as, supposedly, I am, in various theologies, held in the eye and mind of God.

These three sentences have a degree of rhythm and music; for once, moreover, Brodkey's self-absorption comes across less as a contemptible, off-putting egomania than as a rather winsome introspectiveness that draws the reader in sympathetically. Yet such passages are fleeting and infrequent in this book; one seeks in vain the five or ten pages of brilliant writing that might begin, anyway, to account for those celebrated critics' characterization of Brodkey as the American Proust. The plain fact is that 99 percent of the prose here is gawky, aimless, repetitive, murky, and pretentious—and there are few more unenviable literary experiences than having to read over eight hundred pages of it. Oh, the humanity. . . !

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Books

Foucault's gay science

by Richard Vine

Pity the poor biographer who must spend the first page of his text persuading serious readers that his subject, Michel Foucault, was in fact, despite having theorized for decades to the contrary, both a distinct human being and a genuine "author."[1] Apparently, today's fashionable audience, much influenced by Foucault himself, would prefer to regard the writer in terms of an impersonal "circulation of discourses" somehow flowing through but not truly generated by a discrete living being with a particular character, personal history, sensibility—or even (perhaps especially) a singular corporeal body. This substitution of systemic "functions" for individual personality, and thus for individual responsibility, effectually denies the very idea—or should I say "construct"?—of selfhood. For Didier Eribon, an editor at the *Nouvel Observateur*, this is only the first of many absurdities to be overcome in recounting the life of the man who, through more than fifteen volumes in thirty years, struggled to establish as academic doctrine the topsy-turvy notion that thought precedes thinkers and that human minds are hopelessly captive to historically specific paradigms conditioning all action and all possible conceptualizaton: "Before any human existence, there would already be a discursive knowledge, a system that we will rediscover." This fatalism gave rise to the conviction that one can only expose, and practice, purely rhetorical "games of 'truth'"—a bit of neo-sophistry that would be laughable, did a two-decade dominion over the younger American professoriat not supply it a self-fulfilling and frightening credibility.

Who was this impressively bald magus in signature turtleneck, famous worldwide for bringing the Promethean fire of discourse to those—the mad, the criminal, and the sexually oppressed—who were, he alleged, previously voiceless? Certainly one thing revealed in this not otherwise enchanting rehearsal of a highly formalized academic career—a dutiful chronicle which tends to ignore the subject's evident internal turmoil—is that the *ne plus ultra* critic of Power was himself a coolly accomplished operator: a political chameleon and old-fashioned university careerist of consummate skill. Georges Dumézil, the eminent mythologist who helped campaign behind the scenes for Foucault's election to the Collège de France, put it best: "He wore masks, and he was always changing them." Communist as a student under the spell of his teacher Louis Althusser, virulent anti-Communist after his disillusionment with Stalin's "doctors' plot"; junior advisor to the Gaullist ministries of education in the early days of his career, later director of the philosophy department at the constantly embattled ultra-left University of Vincennes; celebrant of the Socialist victory of François

1 *Michel Foucault*, by Didier Eribon, translated from the French by Betsy Wing; Harvard University Press, 374 pages, $27.95.

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Mitterrand in 1981, bitter assailant of the government's passivity when, seven months later, Poland was invaded by Soviet tanks in a last-ditch attempt to preserve late socialism from the reforms of Solidarity; excoriator of the penal system, appalled to learn that modern Western prisons actually curtail the liberties of their inmates, but who nevertheless defended the Muslim fundamentalist regime of Iran's noted libertarian, the Ayatollah Khomeini; beloved and accessible prof, solicitous friend to Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, and others, yet one quick to rise in ferocious how-dare-they rages at anyone who disagreed with his opinions.

What, the great unmasker himself a devotee of metamorphosis and disguises, a bureaucratic schemer preparing a face to meet the faces that he meets? We should not be surprised, for dissembling and theatricality—and Foucault's writing is rife with both—are typical strategies of those who feel, rightly or wrongly, that they have some personal stigma to conceal. "Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order." Among the sage's disciples, over-glorification of the most basic fact of his psychological life, a low-grade paranoia ("we live in a state of 'custody,'" etc.), has become tantamount to a suppression of the most fundamental truth about his studiously ambiguous—and immensely influential—philosophical work. For Foucault himself seems to have regarded homosexuality as the defining *trauma* of his existence.

The facts of the life go a long way toward correcting the myth of a pure disinterested mind, even though Eribon in his determination to get the legend-clouded story straight (and perhaps to protect the intellectual reputation which alone justifies the existence of this narratively pedestrian book) tends to gloss over some of the most resonant biographical data. For example, he makes virtually nothing of the information that Foucault, born in 1926 in Poitiers, was the son of a surgeon and professor of anatomy, and the grandson of still more surgeon-teachers on both sides of his family. Or that the dropped first half of his true hyphenated name, Paul-Michel, was the name of his father and paternal grandfather. Or that he grew up Catholic, a choirboy and acolyte, schooled from the age of fourteen by Christian brothers. Or that the Poitiers of his youth was Vichy territory, German-occupied and grimly awash with refugees and intrigue. We might consider all this mere esoterica and be grateful that, in an age of rampant psychobiography, we have been spared wild speculations on tiresome oedipal themes. We might—were Foucault not the man who went on to compose such books as *The Birth of the Clinic* and to elaborate intricate, darkly compelling theories about the Kafkaesque perniciousness of medical scrutiny.

Consider, too, what a biographer of proper instinct might have made of the observation that throughout his long academic preparation Foucault, first-born son of a provincially prominent family, suffered "no lack of money." Happy as we might be for him in this regard, it is a state of affairs ill-suited to prepare anyone—let alone an habitué of archives and libraries who, as a lowly instructor, could tool around in a beige Jaguar—to plumb the real thought processes, the visceral desires and aversions, of the earth's laboring majority, or to interpret the "discourse," subterranean or otherwise, of the truly dispossessed. Foucault, for instance, later explained his youthful membership in the Communist Party with chilling hauteur: "What could politics mean when it was a question of choosing between Stalin's USSR and Truman's America . . . ? Many young intellectuals, of whom I was one, considered a bourgeois-type professional future—professor, journalist, writer, whatever—to be intolerable. Experience itself had demonstrated the necessity and urgency of creating a radically different society from the one we knew." Well, apart from the snobbish dismissal of a "bourgeois-type professional future" which is in fact the dream of the poor and working-class every-

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where, this rationalization is breathtaking in its absolute failure of moral and political discrimination. Blandly to equate the America of Truman—the America, that is, of the $12-billion Marshall Plan reconstruction of Europe—with the slave empire of Joseph Stalin would be a catastrophe in any thinker, but particularly in one whose special province is the preservation of a radical freedom against insidious threats and "whose entire oeuvre," according to Eribon, "can be read as a revolt against the powers of 'normalization.'" What is actually revealed in these pages is the story of a pampered boy becoming a self-important, if haunted, young man who eventually produces a very substantial body of provocative, though methodologically suspect, new scholarship while engaging with radical causes vigorously enough to satisfy the contrarian temper of his milieu (intellectual Paris of the Sixties and Seventies) but not so egregiously as to scotch his extremely comfortable position at the very pinnacle of a meticulously stratified French academic hierarchy. Foucault was, if such is possible, a cautious radical—his Communist phase having occurred, for example, in that seething caldron of the oppressed masses, the Ecole Normale Supérieure.

We probably need look no farther than the almost sadistic rigors of the elite French educational system in order to fathom our subject's eventual loathing of surveillance, hierarchy, and judgment. No namby-pamby A-F standard applied in this domain, but a strict and public numerical designation of one's standing—always within a given class and sometimes in regional and national tallies, often complemented by witheringly detailed oral critiques before one's assembled classmates. Such was the system that could subject even Foucault, whom one job recommender called "l'être le plus intelligent qu'il eût connu," to the humiliation of having to make two tries at the entrance exams for the Ecole Normale and, later, two tries at the *agrégation* (a particularly brutal rite of passage involving twenty hours of written exams, a "little oral" in the form of a lecture on a randomly assigned topic, and a "big oral" requiring four tests, another lecture, and colloquy on texts in French, Latin, and Greek.)

Nevertheless, in 1946 Foucault, about to turn twenty, was one of thirty-eight young men admitted to that sanctum sanctorum, the ENS faculty on the rue d'Ulm, the nation's supreme institution of higher education in the humanities, from which its academic and political aristocracy are to this day drawn with unapologetic clubbishness. Here tradition dictated that vaunting peculiarity of character, or anyhow of behavior, should accompany individualistic brilliance. But Foucault seems to have exceeded even the perverse *normalien* standard, becoming widely despised for his solitary, dismissive arrogance and his proclivity for melodrama: chasing a fellow student through the night with a dagger and making several suicide attempts, one of which involved slicing his chest with a razor. These desperate gestures the school doctor attributed to "an extreme difficulty in experiencing and accepting his homosexuality"—a conclusion Eribon supplements with the image of a young Foucault repeatedly ill, literally prostrate with shame, after returning from a night of cruising. For Foucault, the transition from hiding to exposure, from deep inner conflict to semipublic confession and "therapy," was bridged when his father, whose wish that he follow a medical career Foucault had rejected, came to escort him to the office of a famous psychiatrist at the Hôpital Sainte-Anne. Ironically, Sainte-Anne was one of several facilities (including the prison hospital in Fresnes) where Foucault, taking certification in psychology from the Sorbonne and the Institut de Psychologie, would himself clinically observe patients and hear expert evaluations from specialists.

During these formative years, Foucault's major intellectual influences were Hegel and to a much lesser degree Marx, viewed as champions of unconditional Freedom, their historical comprehensiveness seasoned with the racy iconoclasm of Nietzsche (the

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supreme example of a "literary" historian and philosopher, not one of whose major tenets will stand up to objective examination), reinforced by the lyricism-disguised-as-hypotheses of Georges Bataille, valued for contending that mankind is always more and other than any formulation applied to it—a thrilling assertion, until we pause to ask, what isn't?—and the murky ruminations of the metaphysician of Being and Nazi collaborator, Martin Heidegger. After five years of classwork, Foucault undertook his first appointments as an *agrégé* at the ENS (where his students included Jacques Derrida), the University of Lille, the University of Uppsala in Sweden (where he went in the vain hope of finding greater homosexual tolerance), Warsaw (where official reaction to a romantic misadventure precipitated a quick departure), and Hamburg (where he completed that last of his thesis-writing). By the time he returned to Paris to defend his minor thesis (an annotated translation of Kant's *Anthropology*) and his major thesis (the 943-page original of *Madness and Civilization*), he was thirty-four years old and ready to produce the monumental studies of manipulative interrogation, direct and indirect, inflicted upon all Westerners, especially the marginal—the societally and, by internalization, personally shamed. "Expressed through courts, prisons, hospitals, psychiatric hospitals, occupational medicine, universities, the press, and informational organs—through all these institutions under different disguises, exists a form of oppression that is deeply rooted in the political." Foucault himself went on serving time, as it were—teaching at Clermont-Ferrand, Tunis, and the new and outlying Vincennes before being elected to the Collège de France at the remarkably young age of forty-four. Finally he could enjoy the kind of latitude any academic foot soldier longs for: a load of twenty-four teaching hours *per year*—twelve in public lectures, twelve in a classroom setting—typically condensed into a three-month residency. The only catch was that the presentations were to be on one's current, professionally cutting-edge research—a proviso about which Foucault complained bitterly and often: "I started writing by chance. And once one has begun, one is a prisoner of this activity; it is impossible to escape." We can only imagine how he would have felt about putting in forty-five years on an assembly line for Peugot.

Given the unrelenting discipline and monitoring Foucault endured during the first four decades of his life, it may be only natural that his works manifest that quality noted by early examiners who found the candidate "more concerned with demonstrating his erudition than with treating the subject proposed." Arguably, it is to be expected that the afflicted Foucault would cultivate a prose style and a recursive compositional structure consonant with his own tortuous writing process—forcing the reader, too, "to work hard, to begin and begin again, to attempt and be mistaken, to go back and rework everything from top to bottom, and still find reason to hesitate from one step to the next . . . to work in the midst of uncertainty and apprehension. . . ." The resultant prose—more psychic discharge than honest investigation—is, for all the beauty and stylistic finesse that Eribon finds in it, an instrument of annoying prolixity, its deliberately mystifying effects created by passages that begin in jolting specificity only to slide, with majestic periodicity, into utter ambiguity and evasiveness. "What, do you imagine that I would take so much trouble and so much pleasure in writing, do you think that I would keep so persistently to my task, if I were not preparing—with a rather shaky hand—a labyrinth into which I can venture, in which I can move my discourse, opening up underground passages, forcing it to go far from itself, finding overhangs that reduce and deform its itinerary, in which I can lose myself and appear at last to eyes that I will never have to meet again? I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face."

Less forgivable, however, is Foucault's tendency to misrepresent historical reality, to distort the lived experience of previous ages

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for the sake of righting putative psychological wrongs in our own. How implicitly can we trust a study of imprisonment written by a man who took up the cause of the recidivist stick-up man Roger Knobelspiess in a manner reminiscent of Norman Mailer's misbegotten freedom campaign for the killer Jack Abbott, and who, beginning two months after his election to the Collège de France, produced pamphlets containing sentiments such as "These are intolerable: courts, cops, hospitals, asylums, school, military service, the press, television, the State"? Nowhere is special pleading more obvious than in Foucault's four-volume, purportedly definitive *History of Sexuality*—a treatment which largely ignores actual sexual practices and the erotic mentalities of most individuals in order to argue, from a very few selective sources, that the primary dynamics of Western sexuality have been an authoritarian nosiness among heterosexuals, coupled with "the disappearance of friendship as a social relation and the declaration of homosexuality as a social-political-medical problem." If this sounds just a bit askew—neglectful of such incidental concerns as, oh, the family, say—bear in mind that the author believed that "there will be no civilization as long as marriage between men is not accepted."

Today, of course, virtual marriage between men, along with much else on Foucault's agenda, is well established—yielding no discernible elevation in the general level of culture. Is it not time for someone to suggest that, just maybe, Foucault based his theory of civilization on an irrelevancy—the sexual orientation and adventurousness of the citizenry rather than their personal integrity and collective public-spiritedness; society's degree of condoned licentiousness rather than its equity and adamant justness? Foucault was explicit about the villainous role *any* coherent system would play in his universe: "this is the discovery of 'there is.' There is *one* . . . not setting man, but anonymous thought, knowledge without a subject, theory with no identity, in God's place."

Yes, no denying it, societal sanctions do function, particularly for the misfit, in a manner not unlike the Greek mechanism of fate and cosmic equilibrium, or the unanswerable Judeo-Christian "I am that I am." Clearly, this is not the age of Saint Augustine; one does not become a culture hero of Foucault's stature by saying, in effect, "I, too, have sinned and come short of the glory"—and then getting on with the business of reconciliation and living. No, it will not do to be a penitent; one must be nothing less than a metaphysical Rebel—hence, all mournful protestation to the contrary, the deep response of so many cossetted academics to the lure of the clandestine, the diabolic, the Sadean. The heroic paranoid, loath above all to be simply ignored by an indifferent "order of things," posits a cosmological conspiracy against himself, communicated in the most innocuous interactions of everyday life.

Homosexuality lends itself to just such an argument against the facts of life, for ultimately "there is" a division of the human species into sexes as a means of procreation, and it is precisely there, whether in consent or opposition, that sexuality and its genuine history begin. Foucault, with his tremendous intellectual prowess, could carry his sublimated defiance to inordinate lengths. Indeed, it was not until he began frequenting the United States, especially San Francisco and New York, in the Seventies and early Eighties, that his homosexuality was made fully and at last joyfully public. Here he gave interviews to gay publications, participated in gay political actions, and enthusiastically patronized gay hangouts. The sadomasochistic themes of those most-favored clubs, along with their labyrinthine physical and experiential structures, so akin to the central metaphor of Foucault's work, Eribon passes over in silence—not one to contemplate their lyrical appositeness for the author of *The History of Sexuality* and *Discipline and Punish*.

Foucault himself might have been a little more forthright in making connections among the availability of these hedonistic

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indulgences, the prevalence of civic liberties in the U.S., and the inventiveness of the capitalist entrepreneurial system. But quite the opposite tended to occur: Americans, who did not grow up with the class-bound or traditionalist or religious contingencies Foucault found so insufferable, adopted his analysis *as if* it legitimately applied to the U.S., where, though not perfectly eliminated, those strictures are—in historically and geo-culturally relative terms—astonishingly minimal. Exasperations of this sort are legion when dealing with Foucault's legacy among Americans, so taken with European intellectual dandyism, so infatuated with the mystic Continent, where a good mind is groomed and ever-so-discreetly paraded like a good lineage, a chic wardrobe, and an elegant paramour—forgetting that the point is not to *be* intelligent but to *perform* intelligently, the final test of which, with or without *maudit* posturing and formal chinoiserie, lies in the validity of one's conclusions. There, of course, is exactly where the intellectual boulevardier—the Nietzsche or Bataille—so often goes astray, having based his pronouncements not on empirical data and stringent positivist logic but on poetically solipsistic Theory. "Do you know why one writes?" Foucault once asked a friend. "To be loved." Perhaps, contrary to his model of involution and aleatory encounters, civilization begins the moment we accept that, sooner or later, we do meet those eyes again, we do have to face each other in the morning, and assume an identity that sticks. Perhaps the secret is to write not *for* love—or, as one suspects in this case, the awed esteem of one's readers and peers—but *with* love. . . . Or so some other literary philosopher might contend.

What can we say about Foucault's conclusions, inseparable from his long anti-Enlightenment campaign? We know very well what alternatives are left by the dismissal of representative democracy and investigative science. They abound in the history of sufferings that Foucault chose either to overlook or blithely to prefer, for others, to the horrors of positivist regulation. Should our medical establishment revert, then, to the methods of a Swaziland "healer"—practices that are, in context, probably no less intrusive than our own? The wrenching tragedy is that Foucault, a probing and compendious intellect both inevitable and necessary in the postmodern debate, saw his own productivity cut short, his life ended in 1984 at the age of fifty-seven, by a virus which will be conquered *only* through the very procedures he most despised. Patient interviews, blood tests, prophylactic measures, laboratory experimentation, drug trials, contagion studies, sexual continence—these are the, on balance, not so terrible price we must now pay for public safety and personal health. No shaman's chant, no casting of bones will cure AIDS.

"The eighteenth century invented freedoms, no doubt, but it provided them with a deep, solid substratum—the disciplinary society from which we still derive." Foucault wrote that sentence as a severe opprobrium. Yet much in our current situation, and his own life and death, would give us ample reason to reconsider it in a far different light.

Mr. Wu & Mrs. Stitch

Artemis Cooper, editor
The Letters of Evelyn Waugh
and Diana Cooper.
Ticknor & Fields, 344 pages, $27.50

reviewed by Brooke Allen

Evelyn Waugh and Diana Cooper first met in 1932. He was twenty-eight, the author of two successful and outrageous novels, *Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies*. In the three years since he had separated from his first wife and been converted to the Roman Catholic Church, he had traveled and drifted about with no fixed abode, written a good bit of popular journalism, and played to the hilt the role of fashionable young novelist.

Lady Diana Cooper was more than ten

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years his senior, and already something of a legend. The youngest daughter of the eighth Duke of Rutland (though many, including Diana herself, believed her natural father to be the poet and editor Harry Cust), she had as a young girl been at the center of the inner circle of the Lost Generation, loved by such promising luminaries as Raymond Asquith, Patrick Shaw-Stewart, Edward Horner, and other young men who were to lose their lives in the First World War. In 1919 she had married Duff Cooper, an impecunious Foreign Office clerk, one of the very few survivors of their prewar coterie. Theirs was a love match, hardly a *parti* in the eyes of the Rutlands. But Duff Cooper's talents justified Diana's faith, for he rose in the Conservative Party to become Secretary of State for War and First Lord of the Admiralty, from which post he resigned with great honor during the Munich crisis. In Churchill's wartime government he acted as British Representative to the French Committee of Liberation in Algiers, eventually becoming British Ambassador in Paris after the Armistice, a post in which he was retained, surprisingly, until 1948, by Attlee's Labour government.

At the time she met Waugh, Diana was taking advantage of her title and beauty to act the part of the Madonna in Max Reinhardt's spectacle *The Miracle*, using her earnings to help finance her husband's parliamentary career. The two met at a party and became instant friends ("I knew then," wrote Diana in her autobiography, "that I wanted to bind Evelyn to my heart with hoops of steel, should he let me"), and the friendship that had begun so sunnily and auspiciously endured, through countless storms and rages, until Waugh's death in 1966. One record of that friendship, of course, is Waugh's indelible portrait of Diana as Mrs. Algernon Stitch in *Scoop*. *The Letters of Evelyn Waugh and Diana Cooper* helps to complete the picture.

This edited correspondence is the latest product of Artemis Cooper's one-woman Diana Cooper cottage industry (the *Letters* follow her edition of her grandparents' correspondence, *A Durable Fire: The Letters of Duff and Diana Cooper, 1913-1950*, and *The Diana Cooper Scrapbook*). It is also the latest item in the more venerable Waugh industry. Though a general interest in Waugh's life is constantly perpetuated by the enduring freshness of his novels, one might wonder why Diana Cooper, a hundred years after her birth, continues to be an object of curiosity; the temptation is to put it down to public prurience, a natural voyeurism into the lives of the rich and famous however out-of-date. It is difficult today to discern Diana's beauty, which lives by legend and not through her photographs, for with an old-fashioned Pre-Raphaelite notion of how a beauty should look, she refused to smile before the camera; the essential element in her looks, their vitality, is lost to us.

But the vitality is still there in her letters, along with her lifelong youthfulness. "The youngest of a family remains a baby until she dies," she wrote about her middle-aged self in her autobiography. "I still automatically sat on the *strapontin*, accepted inferiority as normal, loved chocolates, found many books 'too grown up,' and . . . relied upon being older to understand better." All this is in radical contrast to Waugh, who seems to have been born old and who joyfully embraced the frostiness of age. This difference in habit and outlook was exacerbated by the fact that in its way, Diana's personality was as forceful and unyielding as Waugh's own. As a result, relations between the two were often tempestuous, causing Diana to speak of "that jagged stone, our friendship." The very frequency and violence of their quarrels, however, indicates the genuineness of the love underneath, for no merely casual friends could possibly have put up with the rough treatment it was their custom to mete out to each other.

Waugh's difficult character is well known: the pomposity, the bad temper, the oft-cited snobbery. He himself remarked that "the only human relationships I abide are intimacy, formality and servility. What is horrible . . . is familiarity." The free-wheeling

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Diana loved adventure and even a certain amount of squalor, and exulted in familiarity with all and sundry; she gave Waugh's pomposity—both real and affected—extremely short shrift. Speaking of his near-collapse at the absence of a wine-list or wine-waiter in the Ritz, she gloated that "all this is a great joy for me. Poor Evelyn doesn't *know* and is too proud to realize his ignorance and learn." This sort of friction occurred throughout their lives. While visiting the Coopers in Chantilly, Cecil Beaton heard "Diana and Evelyn being appallingly rude to one another—really vilely, squalidly rude"; the blow-up had occurred, apparently, when Diana had brought Waugh breakfast in bed only for him to criticize the tray as not "properly furnished." "Well, I let him have it," she later related. "I said, 'Really Evelyn, it's too much to put on such an act!' and I gave him the full benefit of everything that I'd been bottling up about his pretentiousness."

Such squalls were all in a day's work, but there were more serious rifts, arising from a very real difference in character and philosophy. Waugh's conversion to Catholicism seems to have made him less "catholic" and broad-minded, more puritanical and judgmental (he considered tolerance, in fact, to be the prevailing deadly sin of the century, and wrote that "it is better to be narrow-minded than to have no mind, to hold limited and rigid principles than none at all"). Puritanism had always played a strong role in Waugh's character (this might surprise readers of the early novels but not those of the still earlier juvenilia); conversion allowed him to formulate this instinctive puritanism into a creed of intolerance toward all save himself. Diana, wholly areligious for better or worse, could not abide this. "We all have grave weaknesses," she wrote him admonishingly; "Baby's [her own] is melancholia and cowardice. You have some too."

At his worst, Waugh could be appallingly blunt and hurtful. He was at no time an admirer of Duff Cooper (perhaps because rather intimidated by him), and finally picked an almost unmendable quarrel with the offhand comment, "I am very sorry to hear that Duff was surprised and grieved to learn that I have detested him for 23 years. I must have nicer manners than people normally credit me with." Though Diana adored her husband, she was able to find it in her heart to forgive her friend even this piece of gratuitous malice. "Poor Wu," she wrote to a friend. "He does everything he can to alienate himself from the affection he is yearning for." The mutual recriminations that pepper this correspondence become tiresome, and Waugh is not in every case at fault. Diana needed to be adored—adored visibly—and it was clearly not in Waugh's nature to shower adoration on anyone. "O do spoil—I spoil you," she pleads: but always in vain.

However, the reader is often compensated for pages of unedifying bickering with Waugh's disarming, because always unexpected, apologies. After his mother's death he wrote to Diana:

> I am full of regret for failures in gratitude and patience and service and that has made me think of my failures towards all I love, and you come very high on the list—so ungrateful, so deliberately mischievous—well, you know better than I. Please forget my constant failures and believe always in my love . . .

Diana's surprised reply sums up the predominant tone of the relationship. "I know you have a great heart but you hate to put it on your sleeve—rightly up to a point—but rather than sometimes letting it fly there by its own dear volition, you pin a grinning stinking mask on the site." Harsh, but tonic, words.

The edited correspondence, like the friendship itself, is not always satisfactory. Diana kept many more of Waugh's letters than he did of hers—at least in the early years—and the extant letters between 1932 and 1945 are almost exclusively from Waugh. A satisfactory give-and-take between the letter-writers is not really achieved until the Fifties,

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and unhappily these later years are years of diminished excitement in their lives; Waugh's professional peak was long over, Diana's and Duff's careers were at an end. As a result much of the potentially best material is missing altogether. Waugh's wartime duty in Yugoslavia with Randolph Churchill, for instance, goes by the wayside—for this the reader must consult Lord Birkenhead's hilarious account (in which he likens Churchill and Waugh to a couple of "belligerent robins") in Alan Pryce-Jones's *Evelyn Waugh and His World*. Likewise, the frustrating, rich, and comical details of Duff's unenviable years of mediating and being crushed between "those two millstones," Churchill and de Gaulle, are scarcely mentioned; here the reader must turn to Cooper's own autobiography, *Old Men Forget*.

But when all this has been said, it is difficult to see what Artemis Cooper could have done to improve on the situation, for it would have been a pity to abandon the material from the Thirties and Forties, spotty though it is. And in general she has done a remarkably thorough job of editing. Indeed, as in so many books of this ilk, the footnotes sometimes take on a life of their own and usurp center stage from the letters themselves; one finds oneself obsessively poring over irrelevant details, flipping back to the index, and pointlessly tracing the genealogies of this much-married and much-intermarried circle of friends. For those who like that sort of thing, all this is riveting; and anyone who might still be under the illusion that Waugh's novels are grotesque exaggerations of reality need only consult these pages, where names like Lady Helen Vane-Tempest-Stewart and Jewel Sebag-Montefiore-Magnus-Allcroft abound.

For those who don't like that sort of thing, the notes might be considered a bit excessive, and Miss Cooper does sometimes get carried away with her task: a passing reference to Princess Margaret or Horace Walpole, to take a couple of random examples, should not necessitate a lengthy footnote. She has perhaps been overzealous, too, in her corrections of the writers' spelling. Both Waugh and Diana were notoriously bad spellers, and the retention of a few of "the more inspired mistakes" only whets the reader's appetite, for inspired they surely are—Diana laments her "mealancholia and hyperchondria," and is afraid her autobiography will not prove scandalous enough to attract "eves droppers."

From its rather unpromising beginning, the collection ends by triumphantly bringing this unlikely twosome to life. Waugh himself, of course, is inevitably disappointing as a character. The innate perversity which caused him to repel so many of his friends must in most cases repel the readers of his letters and diaries as well. His great mystery, like that of Ernest Hemingway (the writer Waugh admired above all other moderns), lies in the question of how any man could be at once so superbly gifted and so deeply foolish. But when Waugh tries to measure his character against that of Diana, whom he loved, he can become sympathetic and even moving. "You have stuck by [your friends] heroically—me especially despite every sort of provocation," he wrote to her. "I lose mine fast. Not I think from not loving them but from expecting them to be different. You find something agreeable in almost everyone. I am put off by anything not wholly agreeable. Wiser and happier baby."

Always a depressive, Waugh starved, drank, and drugged himself into a premature grave. It is saddening to witness his deterioration, even at second-hand, through these letters. A more modern or less strictly religious man might have consulted a psychiatrist for his problems. But Waugh lived by his own unpitying creed, and even his dearest friends were powerless to help him. Diana was horrified by their last visit: "He has lost all *joie de vivre*, eats nothing, drinks a fair amount and thinks a journey to London a labour of Hercules. I attribute it to sleeping-pills, parendahyl in massive quantities, etc. O dear, O dear, it haunts. I'm so very fond of the little monster!" Waugh was

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indeed a monster; but thanks to the record of this long, tempestuous friendship, the reader can almost see him with the mellow eyes of a friend.

War & pieces

Mordecai Richler, editor
Writers on World War II:
An Anthology.
Knopf, 727 pages, $30

reviewed by Julian Symons

What's here and what's not? An opening question to make the anthologist's heart sink. It does, however, have particular relevance here because Mordecai Richler's intention is to produce a mosaic of World War II, a picture produced "by cementing together small pieces . . . of various colours," pieces varying in size from a couple of paragraphs to twenty-odd pages, with the final "big picture" looking "something like a group novel that would tell the story from the invasion of Poland to the signing of the peace treaty on board the battleship *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay," and also "illuminate what it was like for the other side, yesterday's enemies."

Given such aims, the venture was one in which balance was more than usually important, and it is certainly not achieved. This is overwhelmingly an Anglo-American anthology. There are contributors from a dozen other countries, but the amount of space they occupy is less than a third of the book. And the illumination from the other side is almost wholly an illusion, since nearly all of it comes from such witnesses as Marie Vassiltchikov, stranded in Berlin at the outbreak of war, several of whose friends were involved in the July 1944 plot to assassinate Hitler. The few exceptions include a long incoherent piece by Céline about his flight in 1944 from the advancing Allies, and some remarkable last letters written by Japanese Kamikaze pilots. There is nothing that gives a direct view of the War as experienced by German, Italian, or Japanese civilians, nothing that gives any idea of the America First opposition to involvement in the war before the country was forced into it through Pearl Harbor, or of the strong pacifist movement in Britain and its generally tolerant treatment by the government.

So there are many pieces that find no place in the mosaic, and the picture it makes up is inevitably misleading. The war in Russia, which was responsible for more casualties than in any other theater, is ignored except for an extract from Harrison E. Salisbury's book about the siege of Leningrad. By contrast, the slaughter of Jews in concentration camps is one of the principal themes. To say it is given disproportionate emphasis is not to minimize the appalling nature of the Final Solution, but to say a balance has not been struck.

Is it fact or fiction? Well, both. The book includes diaries and letters (Harold Nicolson, Evelyn Waugh, Gide, Sartre, Shaw, Edith Sitwell, Philip Roth), a sprinkling of poems (Auden, MacNeice, Spender, Larkin, Jarrell), much excellent reportage (to use a convenient word no longer fashionable), several short stories. But also scenes or chapters from novels by Doctorow and Mailer, James Jones and John Hersey, Joseph Heller and Heinrich Böll—the list is not exhaustive. Richler has no doubt about the propriety of blending fact and fiction, and, indeed, at first meant to confine himself to the work of novelists and poets but found gaps that had to be filled by factual material.

Imaginative and factual writing on such a subject, however, makes an unhappy mixture. The extract from *The Naked and the Dead* (the sadistic Croft gives a cigarette to a wounded Japanese soldier, then shoots him) is a powerful piece of writing, and so is a passage from *Catch-22*, but to put them beside A. J. Liebling's reporting of the D-Day landings or Norman Lewis's deadpan view of corruption in wartime Naples is disobliging to both kinds of writing. Of course fiction is not inferior to direct reporting of events, but its distinguishing imaginative quality is some-

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how diminished when the two are put side by side. This is so, even though one knows that these particular fictions are based on fact, and that what purport to be factual documents may be exaggerated or even invented. In such a book as this, Liebling and Lewis (who are representative, not exclusive) convince, and beside them the fictioneers seem out of place. The most successful pieces of fiction here are those that view the war at one remove, John O'Hara's tart little piece about a place-seeker who says the wrong thing at a crucial moment, and V. S. Pritchett's serio-comic story about an unfrocked priest buried in a bombing raid.

So the whole thing's a failure? No, if that impression has been given it should be corrected. This seems to me a misconceived anthology. If you forgive or don't mind about the misconception, though, there are lots of good things in it, and it is most skillfully devised. The skill is shown in the placing of incidents and the counterpointing of extracts. The book is ordered chronologically, and extracts from Harold Nicolson's diaries and letters, never longer than a page or two, appear at intervals throughout. Nicolson, a champion gossip and snob, was also a man of nice ironic sensibility, a barometer of liberal opinion. He is first seen deploring the trouble caused by the evacuation of town children to the countryside when the War began. Many were verminous, their accompanying mothers hated country life, the dislike was reciprocated by their rural hosts. Nicolson consoles himself: "The effect will be to demonstrate to people how deplorable is the standard of life and civilization among the urban proletariat." Early in 1941 he lunches with de Gaulle, who has "the taut manner of a man who is becoming stout . . . I do not like him." But at least "he looks less unattractive with his hat off." Later he is found writing a gossipy letter about Virginia Woolf's suicide, worrying about money ("We shall have to live a Woolworth life . . . I feel so poor"), giving £1 to Dylan Thomas ("a fat little man . . . in very dirty trousers and a loud check coat"), and going to a Buckingham Palace tea party ("Princess Elizabeth is a clear, nice girl. I talk to her about the Grenadiers"). The extracts provide a comic vein running through a tale mostly of tragic drama.

The counterpointing is finely, unobtrusively done. A typical though minor example is the placing of the Buckingham Palace tea party next to an extract from Norman Lewis's *Naples '44* in which Lewis is taken to her home by a pleasant-faced old lady who then offers him her thirteen-year-old daughter, and provides a scale of fees for different services. Another extract from Lewis, about a ludicrous scheme by A-Force, which operated in enemy-occupied territory, to spread syphilis in the German army by sending through the lines twenty infected prostitutes, is placed beside a story by his namesake Alun Lewis about a dying soldier who wants only to "enter the darkness and enter the silent village under the hill and enter it with his wife alone."

Gide, who spent the war in North Africa, puts down in his 1943 journal gossip about the incompetence of the American army, "turning tail at the slightest threat and refusing combat so long as they are not sure of being twenty to one." This is followed by a letter from James Jones to his brother, after being wounded at Guadalcanal: "If I do get killed, and I honestly don't see how I can help it, I want you to write that book we were thinking about when I enlisted . . . put into the book the promise that I had and the things I might have written." The account of the July plot to kill Hitler comes to us indirectly through Vassiltchikov in Berlin; it is put next to brief pieces by Simone de Beauvoir and Janet Flanner about the freeing of Paris, the first ecstatic, the second noting ruefully that, with the disappearance of the Germans, the black market that helped to feed the city has vanished, too.

The arrangement helps to give surprise as well as pleasure. Many familiar things are included, Hersey on Hiroshima, I. F. Stone on the death of Roosevelt, Primo Levi on concentration camps, but there are also extracts that will be new to all but historians of the

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period. They include a wonderfully vivid account of a German U-boat suffering, and surviving, a series of depth charges. Change the names and the experience might be that of men in an Allied submarine, something emphasized by the fact that it is preceded by a passage from Nicholas Monsarrat's *The Cruel Sea* about the torpedoing of a German ship and the slaughter of the survivors when depth charges are dropped in the possibly mistaken belief that there is a U-boat beneath the men in the water. Yet admiration is checked by the reflection that Monsarrat's book is fiction, and the German piece is taken from an "autobiographical account" based on truth but distinctly fictionalized.

If, after reading through the whole book, one goes back to the anthologist's own image of the mosaic, it can be seen that the colors are too bright, there is too much meant to dazzle and astonish. In part this is because Mordecai Richler is determined that we shan't be bored, but the price of success is a distortion of reality. "His jokes were stale; like wartime, he was dull," Auden wrote, and for many the reality of war was boredom touched occasionally by terror or high drama. Richler seems unaware of this, in part no doubt because he lived throughout the war in Canada, an eight-year-old when it began. In Montreal, he says, the war years were "incomparably good" for those who survived the Depression and now found work at high rates of pay. Richler's own liking as a novelist for drama, excitement, action, is also relevant. Who wants to read about boredom? he might ask. But as (for instance) accounts of life in the London Auxiliary Fire Service bear witness, a life that mingled apparently pointless drills and endless games of cards in fire stations with the reality of fighting fires, dullness plus violent action, had its own unique vividness.

The consolation of popular entertainment for those on Europe's several home fronts is also disregarded. The songs of the year or the season, lightweight films, comic radio shows like "ITMA" (short for "It's That Man Again," a phrase that became nationally famous) had great emotional importance for British soldiers and civilians, and of course there were equivalents for Americans, Germans, Japanese. To say this is not to suggest, as a whole fleet of academic lemmings does nowadays, that what is popular is of permanent importance. (And the very words "permanent importance" would distress the lemmings.) It is simply that in the circumstances of war, songs like "The White Cliffs of Dover" and "Lili Marlene" were for many soldiers and civilians almost intolerably moving. Roy Fuller encapsulated the feeling in a short poem that finds no place here:

> In these old hackneyed melodies
> Hollow in the piano's cage
> I see the whole trash of the age—
> Art, gadgets, bombs and lies.
>
> Such tunes can move me to confess
> The trash moves, too: that what offends
> Or kills can in its simplest ends,
> Being human, also bless.

Yet that shouldn't be the last word on this occasionally infuriating but as often impressive anthology. Two of the many fine things in it especially touched me. One was Primo Levi's cool reassessment of concentration camp life and of German responsibility in *The Reawakening*, writing of a different order from the moving cries of purely personal despair uttered by other survivors. Another was a passage in a diary kept by one of the Kamikaze pilots: "I die resignedly in the hope that my life will serve as a 'human document'. The world in which I live was too full of discord. As a community of rational human beings it should be better composed. Lacking a single great conductor, everyone lets loose with his own sound, creating dissonance where there should be melody and harmony."

Half a century on there is little sign that the community of rational human beings Ensign Heiichi Okabe envisaged exists, let alone that it may one day be better composed.

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Shorter notices

Carlos Fuentes The Campaign.
Translated from the Spanish
by Alfred Mac Adam.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 246 pages, $22.95

The major literary export from Latin America nowadays seems to be bad historical novels. In 1990 *The General in His Labyrinth*, Gabriel García Márquez's slapdash hagiography of Simón Bolívar, appeared in English translation. Now Carlos Fuentes's latest book, the first part of a trilogy on the wars of independence, has been rendered into English. *The Campaign* is more intellectually honest than García Márquez's effort. But it is so hokey in its plotting, so lazy in its characterization, and so labored in Alfred Mac Adam's translation that this reviewer found herself pining for the at least occasionally enjoyable Bolivarian labyrinth.

Fuentes's hero is a fictional Argentine named Baltasar Bustos. Baltasar is a high-minded *criollo* (European-blooded white) who whiles away the hours debating revolutionary theory in a Buenos Aires café. Feeling guilty about a disastrous prank he pulled on a viceregal official, he decides to put his Enlightenment ideals to a more honorable test by becoming a warrior for independence. Conveniently, his travels from one theater of war to another enable Baltasar to pursue the beautiful but elusive royalist he has fallen in love with in the opening pages.

For reasons having to do with the surprise ending, the novel is narrated by one of Baltasar's friends and debating partners, Manuel Varela. Varela has chosen to remain safely in Buenos Aires, a city liberated early in the struggle, rather than venture inland to fight the Spanish overlords who continue to hold sway over much of the continent. Technically, that makes this an epistolary novel, since Baltasar supposedly fills Varela in on his insurrectionary activities by mail. It is a ridiculous set-up. Whole chapters go by without any mention of Varela or any recognition of the second-hand nature of the narrative. Moreover, for us to get the continuous flow of information and impressions that we do get, Baltasar would have had to devote more time to his correspondence than he does to warring with the Spanish.

The Campaign is a novel of ideas. The *criollos*' famed love affair with the thought of the French *philosophes* is mentioned on nearly every page. Baltasar feels much more strongly about *égalité* than he does about *liberté* (or *fraternité*, for that matter) because he fears the nascent republics are going to abolish slavery only on paper, thus perpetuating "discrimination." Never mind that the word "discrimination," in the 1810-20 period during which the novel is set, denoted perceptiveness or good taste—not invidious treatment of "people of color."

The novel's other anachronisms flow from Fuentes's confusing one era of flawed revolution with another. A character natters on about the "contradictions" that fester within Latin American society. Another describes the *criollos* arriving in the jungle "to implement the revolution." Yet another reveals the "objective reasons for his military strategy." Are we in the Army of the Andes with the great General José de San Martín or with Che and Fidel in the Sierra Maestra?

Aside from matters of sound fiction-writing, this is, in a way, Fuentes's point; and it is not a bad one. He is grappling with the arrogance of the Latin American elite—a class that defeated the Spanish but not its own racial snobbery or power lust. That fact might go further in explaining the deformed history of Latin America than the depredations of the Europeans or *yanquis*. Following such thinkers as Voltaire, the *criollos* "[believed] in reason but [thought] it should be exercised only by an enlightened minority capable of leading the masses to happiness." From there to the psychotic strivings of Peru's Shining Path guerrillas is not such a great leap.

It would take a much better novelist than Carlos Fuentes to explore this theme in a meaningful way. García Márquez tried but he was too smitten with his chosen general, Bolívar, to take us very far.

—Lauren Weiner

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Marion Elizabeth Rodgers, editor
The Impossible H. L. Mencken:
A Selection of His Best Newspaper Stories.
Foreword by Gore Vidal.
Doubleday, 707 pages, $27.50; $15 paper

Reading this collection of H. L. Mencken's newspaper articles, most of them from the Twenties and Thirties, one begins to reflect on the persistence of human folly. Indeed, Mencken's merry attack on the pieties and lunacies of his day inspires an oddly comforting thought: maybe things in America have not so much declined as remained depressingly the same.

Only the forms that public stupidity takes have changed: in Mencken's time literature, for example, was judged in terms of its fealty to middle-class morality; now it is evaluated according to its political utility. But the sanctimoniousness, the righteous pressure to conform, the total lack of interest in art as such—these are with us still. We recognize the notion that "there is a body of doctrine in every department of thought that every good citizen is in duty bound to accept and cherish," just as surely as we recognize the "undiluted drivel—nine thousand words of bad English without an idea in it"—of a political speech from 1924.

It is, in part, this shock of recognition that makes even the three-dozen articles here about long-forgotten political conventions eminently readable. It is also, of course, their author's famously pungent style. But perhaps Mencken's most impressive quality is sheer sanity: a mind unclouded by sentiment, received wisdom, or the craven desire to please. Indeed, as long as there are no chiropractors, college professors, or Prohibitionists involved, he seems to judge each case entirely on its merits. Thus, he protests not only the persecution of Scopes for teaching evolutionary theory in the Tennessee schools but also the government's deportation of radicals Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, whose books he praises for the "quite extraordinary skill" with which they were written. (Anyone who used the language well received Mencken's gratitude.) And for all the recent fuss about his supposed anti-Semitism and racism, it is worth noting that he takes up the cause of German Jews in the Thirties and of a black who'd been denied admission to law school because of his race.

If there is something missing here, it is the note of intimacy, even the sort of manly bluntness to be found in, say, Orwell. Mencken's voice is too Olympian, too impersonal, to convey so much as a hint of ordinary regret or sadness. The persona of this writer is entirely a public one. But then that is what he was—a public moralist.

Of the nearly two hundred articles in *The Impossible H. L. Mencken*, two-thirds have never before been reprinted. Marion Elizabeth Rodgers, the book's editor, has selected wisely; the pieces here, whether on English food or bank insurance or William Jennings Bryan, show Mencken at his exuberant best. Unfortunately, her introduction and running commentary are full of clumsy writing and all sorts of grammatical solecisms that Mencken would have savaged. Gore Vidal's foreword, too, is marred by various faults of which his subject remained free: fatuous self-importance, rambling discontinuity, and lapses into peevish sarcasm. (Vidal also drags in his senator grandfather once again. Can there be any literate American who remains unaware of this venerable ancestor?) But perhaps anyone who appears side by side with Mencken is doomed to look bad in comparison. He had an extraordinary gift for launching all-out assaults without ever sounding spiteful or self-righteous. Instead, he seems genuinely to relish the spectacle of human idiocy in the Republic, and thus enables us, at least while reading him, to do the same.

—*Evelyn Toynton*

David R. Slavitt Virgil.
Yale University Press, 181 pages,
$30; $11 paper

The series of Hermes Books from Yale University Press, under the general editorship of

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John Herington, has the laudable aim of bringing humane and humanist attention to the Greek and Roman classical writers. Between the Scylla of philological minutiae and the Charybdis of clamoring critical jargons Hermes escorts its little ships. The series harks back to the general-interest books of Richard Jebb and Gilbert Murray, yet it also exacts an awareness of how such modern writers as Eliot, Pound, and Joyce have forever changed our perception of the classics. The series' successes to date have been Herington's own *Aeschylus*, Sara Mack's *Ovid*, and, especially, D. S. Carne-Ross's exciting and innovative *Pindar*. Now comes *Virgil*, by David R. Slavitt, a prolific poet, translator, and novelist.

This has, notoriously, been a tough century for Virgil. High Modernism gleefully shattered the public bust of the noble bard; Pound was hostile to Virgil as Eliot was to his conscious heir Milton. After millennia of worship—as the saint manqué of Dante, as the Augustan prophet of Dryden, as the mellifluous musician of Tennyson, he became a bit a sort of Roman Longfellow, passé patriotic poseur and classroom bore. The spotlight swung to sexy Catullus, savage Juvenal, sublime Lucretius, as it did in English to Donne, Pope, and Blake. Recent decades have seen some righting of the balance. The *Eclogues*, Virgil's ten early pastorals, are now read as meditations on poetry. Slavitt agrees: "What Virgil is saying, it seems to me, is that for all of poetry's attractive richness, one can't live there." The *Georgics*, four books nominally on crops and vines and animals and bees, are today taken for the poet's masterpiece, a dark brooding on the sources of health and life on the land and in the social order at large. Slavitt, too, finds them a profound "confrontation of labor and art with death and oblivion"; he speaks of them as celebrating "the triumph of art, which is order and articulation, over death's mess."

The *Aeneid*, in which a founding imperialist ruins a woman and slaughters natives—and all in a lightly coded glorification of a real Emperor-patron—has not been able to scramble back into fashion. Slavitt sensibly rejects a modish "subversion" theory, which finds in Virgil "a kind of Shostakovich to Augustus's Stalin" and in the *Aeneid* "an anti-Augustan document, a subversive performance in which subtext . . ." etc. He settles instead for the fashionable sentimentalization of Dido and Turnus, Aeneas's victims. This view is luridly expressed elsewhere by Camille Paglia: "Vergil is 'involved' with Dido. Her obsession, suffering, and passion of love-hate are the grandest things in literature since Euripides' Medea. Vergil's identification with her is as palpable as Flaubert's with Madame Bovary or Tolstoy's with Anna Karenina. . . . The liquid Latin is thrillingly, hypnotically autoerotic. . . . Vergil is a decadent poet, a virtuoso of destruction." In this reading, Aeneas comes out a bigot and a murderer, ancestor of totalitarian icons. Slavitt accordingly finds Virgil torn (fatally, for the poem) between "private pessimism and public optimism," a prey to "contrariness," "gloom," and "melancholy"—stuck with an insufferable hero and sighing for the victims.

So Slavitt conveys a sense of how Virgil is read today. If rarely original, he is a reliable guide to the lay of the land. Where he irritates—and it is, in a way, an appealingly old-fashioned belletristic vice—is in a certain laxly chatty harrumphing and meandering. We read of chocolate soufflés and the "lit biz" and "Hollywood hacks" and of how Joe Paterno, football coach at Penn State, likes the *Aeneid* and of how Aeneas has a "Gary Cooper or Humphrey Bogart blankness" (Cooper maybe, but *blank* Bogart? If you're going to adduce pop culture, get it right). Dr. Johnson, of all people, figures as founder of academy criticism. It's like listening to a beloved prof ramble on late in the semester. Such displays of authorial idiosyncrasy are not, however, what the series promised as meaningful engagement with contemporary literature and thought.

But after all reservations, Slavitt's *Virgil* is a sensible, informed, and entertaining introduction to the latest (though not, of course, the last) Virgil.

—Donald Lyons

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Letters

George Orwell

To the Editors:

While I am in full agreement with Hilton Kramer [in "An Orwell for the Nineties?", November 1991] that the distopia Orwell describes in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* can only be Stalinist Russia—the best proof of this being, I think, the fervid embrace of the book by countless writers and intellectuals of what was only yesterday the Soviet bloc—the use Mr. Kramer makes of this approaches the Orwellian. Armed with *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Michael Shelden's new biography of Orwell, he uses the books to assert once again the neoconservative *goodthink* that there is (or was) a singular anti-Communism—the one espoused by himself and his political kin—and not a variety of anti-Communisms, including ones quite distant in approach and temperament from his own.

Mr. Kramer would have us imagine, I suppose, an Orwell of the 1980s issuing position papers from his office at the Heritage Foundation, attending the occasional conference sponsored by the Committee for the Free World, warning of perishing democracies and the historical impossibility of totalitarian societies to topple the Communists who rob them of their freedoms. However, no reader of *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell*—the four-volume edition which Mr. Kramer himself, many years ago, rightly identified as the true Orwell biography—could possibly imagine Orwell subscribing to this sort of armchair anti-Communism. In his last piece for *Partisan Review*, published in the winter of 1949—it was a review-essay of Gandhi's autobiography—Orwell asks, "Is there a Gandhi in Russia at this moment?" There was not, of course, but Orwell was not merely asking a rhetorical question—he was hoping against hope that civil disobedience might somehow defeat Communism "before," as he writes, "somebody presses the button and the rockets begin to fly."

Although no one, me included, would have predicted it, this type of revolt against the Communist dictators is what came to pass, and had he had his health, I have no doubt that an Orwell of the Eighties would have been not in an anti-Communist think-tank but in Gdansk with Adam Michnik, in Prague with Havel, in Moscow with Sakharov. And in a sense he was, for writers such as Timothy Garton Ash, Paul Berman, and Michael Ignatieff are Orwell's true anti-Communist heirs.

I might add that the above writers all consider themselves liberals of one shading or another. And all are much more likely to continue to look to Orwell's writings for guidance—and thus to keep Orwell alive in the Nineties as no biography can—than their "thirtysomething"-year-old contemporaries on the Right. Save for his "crank element"—his regrettable but not vehemently held prejudices against homosexuals, feminists, vegetarians, and so on—of what use, in a post-Communist era, could Orwell be to the *American Spectator* crowd, or the *Dartmouth Review* alums, or, for that matter, to the younger contributors to *The New Criterion*?

Not that this would have particularly bothered

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Orwell: As he wrote in his essay "Writers and Leviathan," he had little use for "the rather snobbish, pietistic Conservative orthodoxy" he traced, by the way, to your journal's namesake, *The Criterion*.

Gerald Marzorati
Senior Editor
Harper's Magazine
New York, NY

Hilton Kramer replies:
It is nice to know, even after the fact, that Mr. Marzorati has been a closet anti-Communist all along when he gave such convincing signs of being a run-of-the-mill fellow-traveler of the orthodox Left. I never would have suspected it myself. But then, that is—was?—the beauty of closet anti-Communism: by its very nature it is beyond suspicion, and therefore likely to cost the closetee (as one may call him) absolutely nothing, especially among his friends and associates on the orthodox Left.

Still, political closets are not, perhaps, the best environment in which to acquire sharp reading skills, particularly when it comes to the reading of essays that the closetee finds politically distasteful. It may be for this reason that Mr. Marzorati failed to notice that I was at some pains in my article on Orwell to point out that, in my opinion, he was "in no sense a conservative." In this respect I differ from some of my conservative friends, and this may be another source of Mr. Marzorati's confusion. He does seem to have had some trouble paying attention to what I actually wrote, which he nowhere quotes or refers to in his letter. Perhaps he got it mixed up with some of the other things that have been written about Orwell.

He is also mixed up about some other matters. I have great respect for Sakharov, about whom I have written elsewhere, but I shouldn't have thought that the father of the Soviet H-bomb was an ideal candidate for the role of a Russian Gandhi. But then, I am no admirer of Gandhi, and think Sakharov was a far greater man. Still, even Sakharov and his fellow dissidents had a little help from a man named Ronald Reagan and his foreign policy. This is something well known to Mr. Gorbachev and Mr. Havel but still unacknowledged by the likes of Mr. Marzorati, who instead fulminates over the Heritage Foundation and the exact degree to which George Orwell meets the current standards of political correctness.

Schjeldahl on Schjeldahl

To the Editors:
I wish to correct a canard in Roger Kimball's essay on me in your November issue. I am not "the scion of a rich Midwestern manufacturing family." My family is neither rich nor involved in manufacturing. I have earned my whole income as a free-lance writer and lecturer, with brief stints in other professional capacities, for over twenty years. Mr. Kimball could have checked his information. Instead he used it to impugn a truthful representation of me in Robert Storr's introduction to my book *The Hydrogen Jukebox: Selected Writings 1978-1990*.

Peter Schjeldahl
New York, NY

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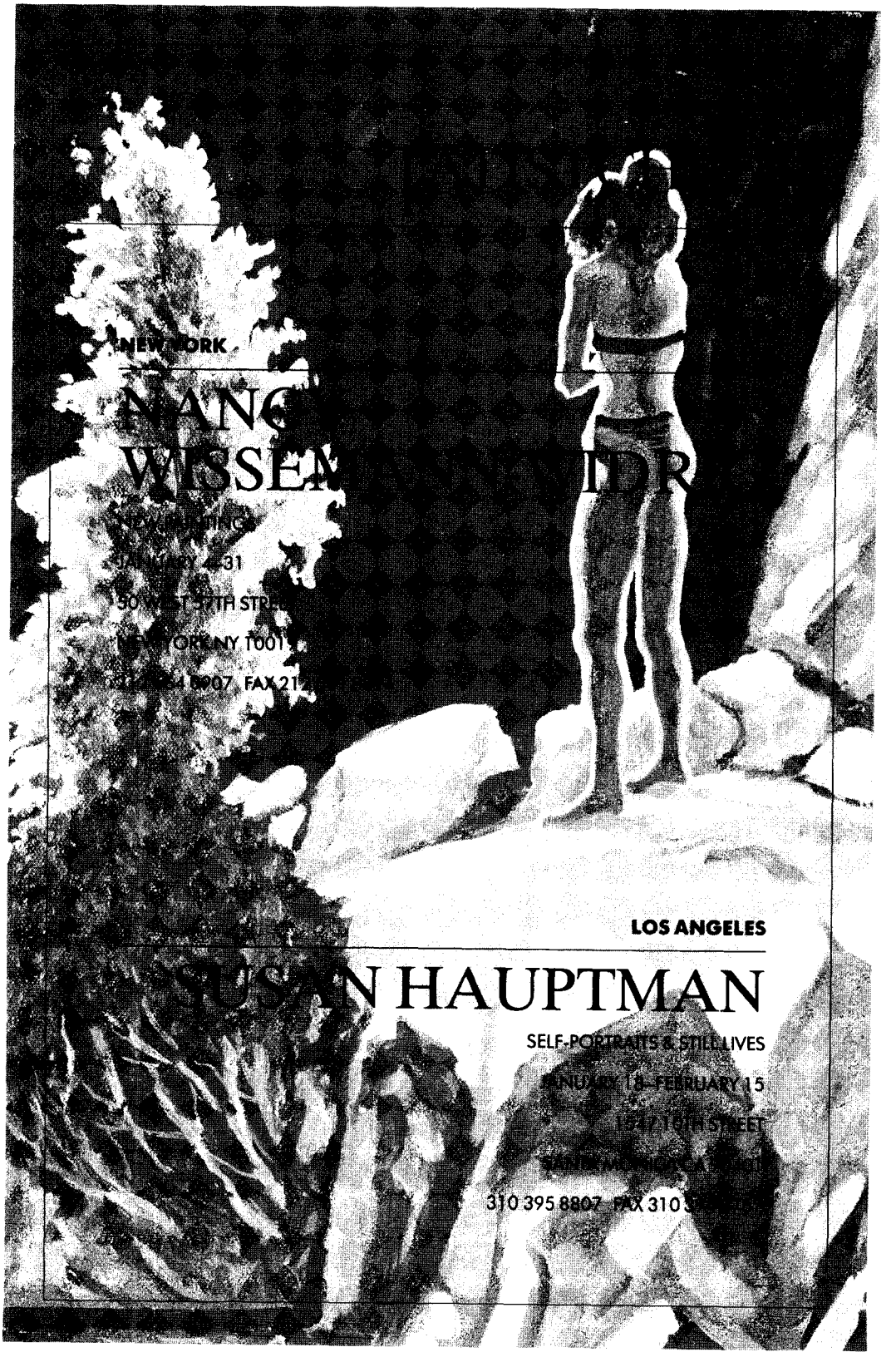

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Stuart Davis, Havana, 1920, watercolor on paper, 14 x 20 inches.

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